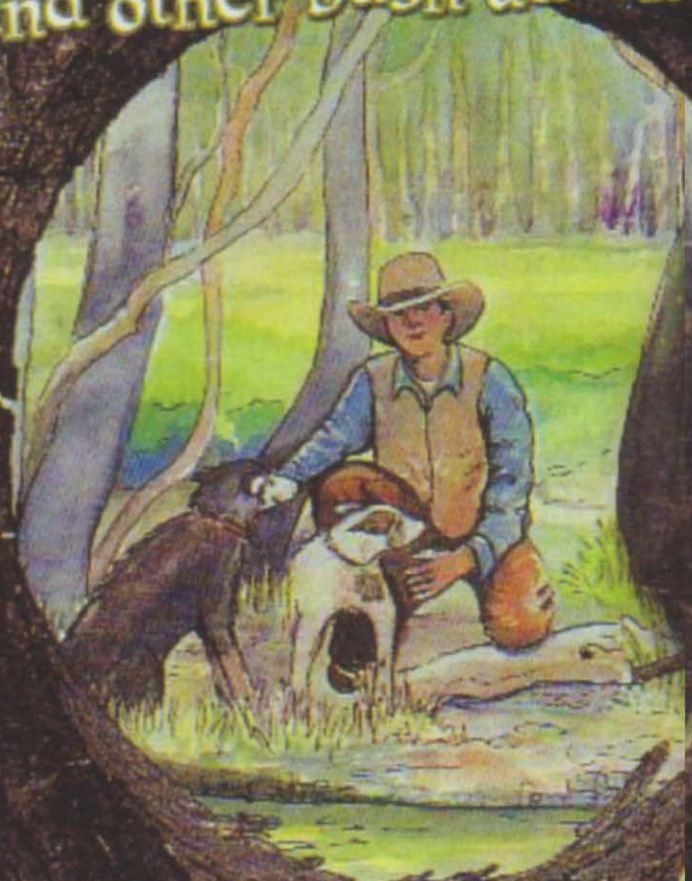


Bill's Battle of the Bull

and other bush adventures



Errol Wright

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ERROL WRIGHT



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the young readers who enjoyed *Bill's Bush Adventures*, as well as new readers who have discovered that reading can be fun.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Appreciation must be expressed for all the hours Linda Bryan—a busy mother of three, and English and Art teacher—has devoted to editing and illustrating this book.

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INTRODUCTION

This second selection of “Bill Stories” has been written to satisfy the popular demand for simple, true stories of days gone by. The adventures Bill experienced while growing up have lessons for today’s children, who live in a very different world.

The first group of stories record Bill’s escapades while he and his parents were living on a 400-acre property, halfway between Taree and Forster, located on the north coast of New South Wales. From 1942 to 1944, Bill’s dad was a charcoal burner helping the war effort.

As World War II was winding down, the demand for new houses drew the family back to Forster, where the second section of stories occurred. In 1950 at the age of 17, Bill left home to attend Avondale College, where he continued his journey with God as director of his life.

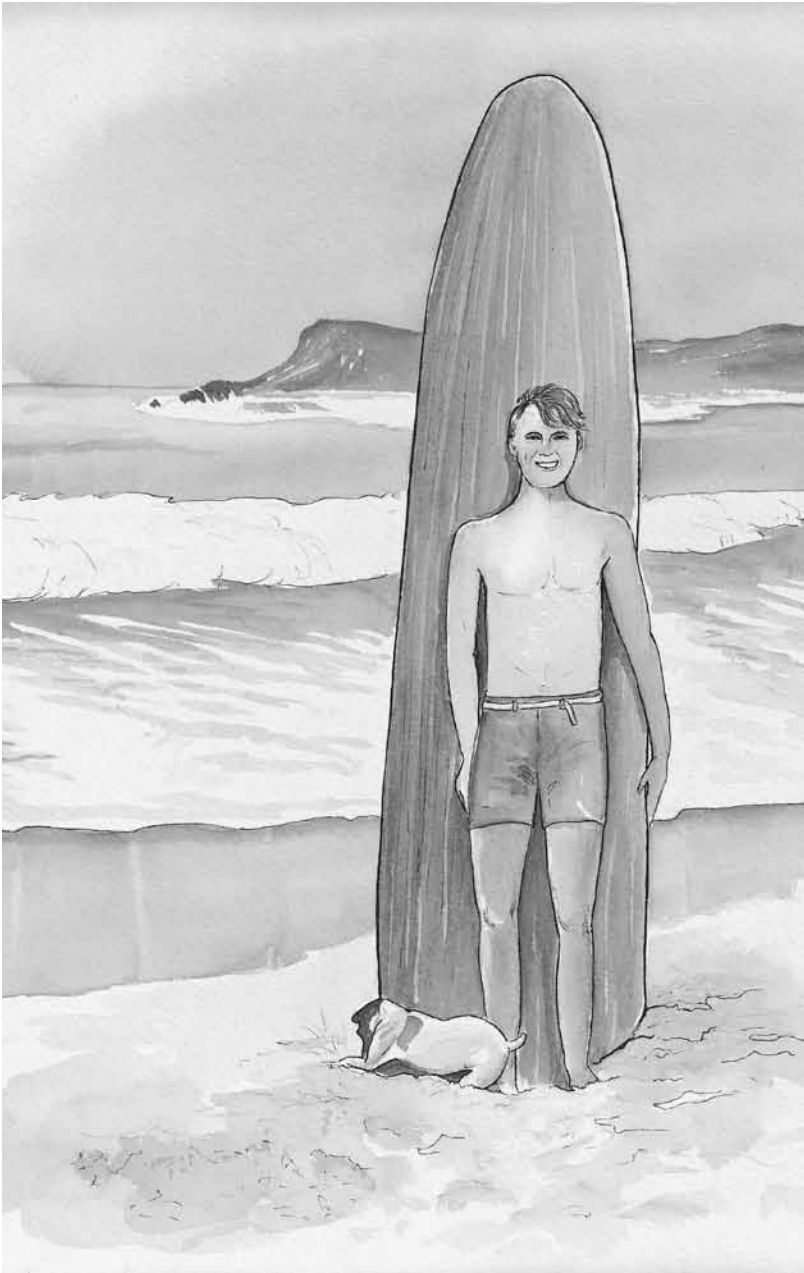
As some of the words used in these stories may come from a different time and place than that of the reading, there is a list of words at the back of the book. Words included in this are marked with an asterisk (*) the first time they appear in the stories.



FORSTER'S FIRST SURFER

While Bill was still in primary school, his dad signed on as ship's carpenter for a wealthy ship owner. He was travelling around the world in a three-mastered barquentine* called the *Cap Pilar*. It was a sailing ship of nostalgia, used by explorers of long ago like James Cook and Abel Tasman. It had crisp white sails and glided majestically over the deep indigo sea. They explored distant and isolated places spending weeks anchored in tropical lagoons and enjoying the hospitality of local islanders. There were also times when they battled storms and huge seas.

During their stay in Hawaii, Bill's dad was fascinated by the skills of the local surfers. None of the crew had ever seen men ride waves while standing on pieces of wood before. They discovered the surfboards were carefully shaped to make them easier to control as the riders moved across the breaking waves.





When they travelled across the island to Waikiki Beach, famed for the biggest waves, they were astonished to see the locals catching huge curling waves and riding them right up to the beach. Bill's dad and the rest of the crew wanted to learn how to surf and they were sorry they weren't staying long enough to try.

As the *Cap Pilar* sailed across the ocean, the conversation at meal times often returned to the extraordinary skills of the *He'e Nalu* (wave sliding) of the Hawaiians. Bill's dad couldn't forget the sight of those men on boards gliding smoothly down the surface of those huge waves. He was determined to try it out when he returned to Australia.

During the early years of World War II, Bill and his parents lived in Forster on the north coast of New South Wales. Forster has superb beaches such as One Mile and Burgess Beach, and is nestled around the Wallis Lakes. It has always been a favourite holiday town where people went to swim, fish, work on their boating skills, go for walks or just laze about.

When he wasn't building houses, Bill's dad enjoyed Forster's Main Beach, where he taught Bill to bodysurf. In those days, there were not many surfboard riders in that part of Australia. Before Duke Kahanamoku, the Hawaiian Olympic swimmer, introduced surfing to Australia in 1915, bodysurfing was the way people rode the waves.

During the Christmas holidays of 1941, Bill's dad finally found time to make a surfboard like the ones he'd seen in Hawaii. He found a piece of pinewood about three metres (nine feet) long and shaped it after the style of the boards he had seen on Waikiki Beach. When he had the shape right, he sanded the wood to a smooth curve. He applied three coats of varnish until he could see his eager face reflected in the surface.

Bill almost danced in excitement as his dad carried the new board to the beach. His mum didn't want to miss the entertainment either. Bill's dad pushed the board out into the gentle surf and lay down, attempting to paddle out to the bigger waves. He didn't immediately gain the skill of the Hawaiian surfers, as they had been practicing their *He'e Nalu* skills well before Captain Cook discovered them surfing in 1778. Bill's dad was not very successful that day, as he struggled to control the big, clumsy board in the contrary surf.

The local people thought the whole thing was a big joke but Bill's dad persevered until he could surf the waves with ease, lying on his stomach. But before he could get to the standing-up stage, he was called in to the recruiting office. Bill waited nervously to find out if his dad was going to be a soldier. However, Bill's dad was not accepted into the army due to his back problems. Instead, he was asked to rent a farm where he could burn charcoal, a very important fuel for the war effort.

All thought of surfing had to be postponed as Bill and his parents packed and moved to their bush* property. Halfway between Forster and Taree, this was a drastic change for Bill and his parents, as they faced primitive, country living.

"We'll have to put up with a very simple lifestyle for the next few years," Bill's dad warned as they settled into the small timber-slab cottage. It reminded Bill of pictures he'd seen of Ned Kelly's* family home down in Victoria. Bill's mum had to carry water from the tank that caught water off the rusty, iron roof. She had to light a fire to heat up the old copper when she wanted to do the washing.

There was a small shed at the back of the house for Bill's pushbike and other storage. In the front of the house was



an orchard that needed reviving. It would become very important as the months rolled by. On the hill behind the house were cow bales and a feed shed, with hen houses and another feed shed halfway down the hill.

One thing that wasn't close by was a beach. They were surrounded by bush, with thick, almost-impenetrable eucalyptus trees stretching up into the mountains.

"We'll miss our Sundays on the beach," Bill's dad sighed as they explored the property. "I was just starting to get the hang of surfing with that board. There's no chance of learning how to ride the waves standing up now.

"The board will have to go into storage for quite some time, by the way this horrible war is going," he added. "Maybe we will get a chance to try it out again one day."

Bill and his parents remained on the farm for three years, until the war was nearly over and the demand for charcoal died out. For Bill's dad, the hard work of cutting down trees and shovelling charcoal made his back even worse. He never went back to surfing, though the photographs were kept for years—proof that Bill's dad was the first person to make a surfboard and use it to ride the waves of Main Beach Forster. Giving up surfing was a small sacrifice compared to what others had to make in their individual efforts for the war and for their country.



THE LUMPY CARPET SNAKE

Bill found entertainment in unexpected places on the farm. When a batch of eggs turned into a clutch of chickens, Bill made it his duty to watch over them. Bill and his dad kept a dozen or so black hens known as Black Orpingtons. They were good layers and their habit of going clucky made them great mothers.

Bill always got excited when one of the black hens would suddenly start to fluff out her feathers and get all cranky. The clucky hen would settle in an egg box and take possession of the day's eggs. When Bill noticed this happening, he would get a tea chest, lay it on its side and flatten a bundle of straw inside to make a nest. He then used a wheat sack over the front to make the inside dark.

Next, he selected a dozen good-sized eggs and placed them in the nest. When all was ready, Bill would remove the clucky hen from the egg box she had taken over and place her in the



chest on top of the eggs. The hens were always very happy with this arrangement. They would settle down and keep the eggs warm for three weeks.

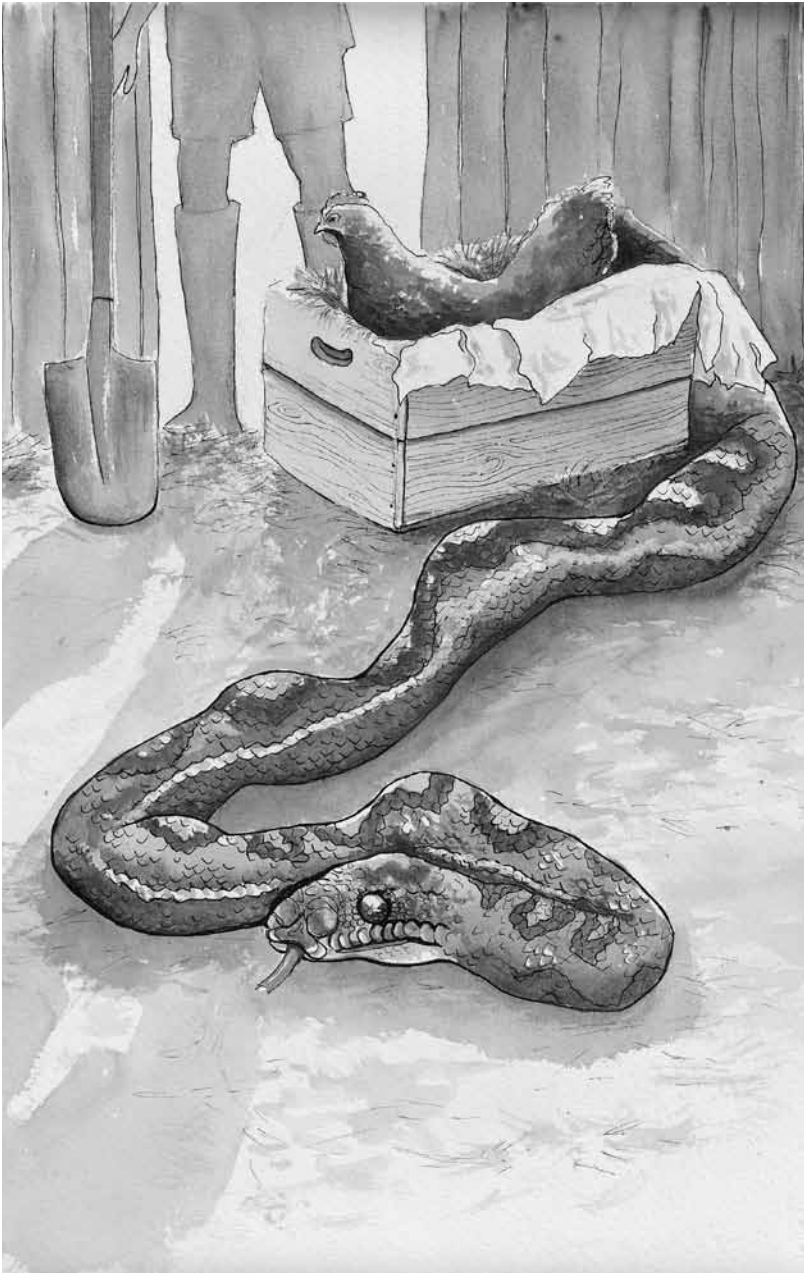
Every morning, Bill would take the sack off the front of the chest and remove the hen from her nest. He would get squawked at and pecked for his trouble but the hens had to eat and drink. As soon as they were finished, they would rush back to continue their task.

Bill found the colour schemes fascinating. Eggs from the white hens always produced yellow chickens, which grew into white hens and roosters. Dark brown eggs from the black hens resulted in black chickens. There were a few Rhode Island Red hens, too, so Bill would select a few of their eggs for the batch. The result would be a clutch of different-coloured chickens following after their black mother.

Bill also wondered, "How is it that a black cow eats green grass gives white milk, which can be turned into yellow butter?" His mother smiled wisely, simply saying it was how God planned it all to make life interesting and keep us asking questions.

At one time, Bill had four black hens sitting on eggs that needed exercising twice a day. He decided it was worth the effort when the chickens hatched and the hens were set free to wander around with their little balls of fluff following along. One signal from their mother would send all the chickens scurrying for safety beneath her feathery shelter. Whenever a hawk or crow circled above the chicks, the hens flapped into an organised retreat.

One day when Bill came into the feed shed to let his hens out, he froze in disbelief. There in the middle of the floor area was the biggest, oddly-shaped carpet snake* he had ever seen. On closer inspection, he counted six lumps scattered





along the centre of the snake. He whirled around and saw that one of the sacks had fallen off a hen's tea chest.

He could see that six eggs were missing! The snake had stolen the eggs right out from under the hen. As he watched the snake slowly moving towards the gap under the outside door, he realised it would have trouble squeezing through the small opening.

Bill was angry about the snake's bold theft and he made a quick decision—an unlucky decision for the greedy snake and probably not the best way to deal with an otherwise harmless snake. He saw the spade he used to clean up all the mess the hens made and with sharp, precise chops, he divided the snake into sections between the lumps. He proceeded to surgically remove the eggs from each section of snake. As each egg was retrieved, he returned it to the hen. The eggs were still warm from their brief time in the snake.

Soon all six eggs were back where they belonged, to one day turn into chickens. The dogs had snake for dinner that evening and all was well in the hen house. Ten days later, the eggs hatched and 12 healthy little chickens were soon running about under the watchful eye of their mother.

"I wonder what those chickens would think if they knew they had spent some of their early days inside a snake," Bill wondered aloud. He found himself feeling sorry for the snake but reminded himself that the greedy thief only got what was coming to him. The mother hen, so vigilantly attentive to the enemy in the sky, had been caught completely unawares by the sly, slow slither from right beneath her.



THE HOLLOW LOG

The dogs were prowling and restless. It was a sign that meant, “Feed us now or we go hunting.” Bill’s dad didn’t like the dogs to go hunting alone for fear they could get shot or injured. “Dogs don’t understand human borders or boundaries,” his dad explained.

So it was decided to get the gun and do some hunting close by. “We’d better see if we can shoot some rabbits,” Bill’s dad suggested. “There are plenty around the paddocks so we should soon bag a meal or two to keep the dogs happy.” Rabbits had become pests on farms in the region and the farmers were keen for anyone to try to reduce the rabbit population.

As soon as the dogs saw the gun, they nearly jumped out of their skins with excitement. They ran off down the track past the orchard, teasing each other and biting each other’s ears. They looked back often to make sure Bill and his dad were still coming.

“The dogs sure are excited. They know we’re going



hunting, even if it's only down the paddock," Bill laughed.

"Yes, they can almost taste the meat. We must call them back though, or they'll frighten away every living animal for miles around."

Even the cows looked nervous as the four dogs loudly raced about and chased each other. "Come behind!" Bill's dad commanded. "You'll scare off everything that moves if you're not careful."

The excited dogs reluctantly obeyed and fell in behind Bill and his dad. They decided to explore the lesser-used paddock. When the main paddock was short of grass, a few of the dry cows were let in with one of the bulls but this semi-cleared paddock was usually left to the birds, reptiles, wallabies and rabbits.

"There should be plenty of rabbits to choose from in this paddock," said Bill's dad as they climbed through the fence. "We haven't been over this way for months."

"What about that big blackberry patch over by the big dead gum tree?" Bill suggested. "Rabbits love to make their home inside the protection of blackberry bushes."

"Good idea. You keep the dogs back while I sneak over and take a look."

Bill struggled to control the four eager dogs. They were usually so obedient but when they heard the rifle shot, they were off like greyhounds at a racetrack, with Bill charging along behind.

"Any luck?" shouted Bill as he raced around the blackberry patch.

"Yes! They'll have some meat for tea. But one rabbit's not enough for four dogs. The trouble is the noise of the rifle sent all the rabbits down their burrows."

"Why not let the dogs find their own dinner?" Bill





suggested. "They're good hunters and can sniff out game when they need to."

"OK!" agreed Bill's dad. "Let's keep walking but this time, we'll let the dogs do the work."

When Bill told the dogs to go "skitch 'em," he didn't have to tell them twice. Off they went, noses to the ground, all except for Toss. She would run along for a few metres, then jump up in the air to see if she could spot a rabbit.

It wasn't long before she gave a yelp and tore off after a rabbit, with the other three dogs in hot pursuit. Bill laughed as he watched the rabbit leading the dogs in and out of the trees, bushes and fallen logs. Then with a sudden U-turn, the rabbit dived into a hollow log.

The log was a maze of hollow, broken branches, so there were plenty of escape routes. However, there were also plenty of dogs to guard the exits. The trick was to smoke the rabbit out and Bill's dad had come prepared.

"I'll collect some dry grass and bark, while you organise the dogs," Bill volunteered.

With the fire was going, they fanned the smoke into the log. It wasn't long before they heard some movement and the dogs tensed their muscles, ready for action. Then, the unexpected happened. From the far end of the log, where Bruce was stationed, shot the biggest goanna they had ever seen.

The dog jumped straight up in the air, as the hissing, angry reptile raced across the grass and up the nearest tree. From a sturdy branch, the goanna poked out his tongue and hissed his disapproval. As soon as they had all recovered from the shock of the charging occupant, they returned to the business of smoking out the rabbit.

"Let's hope we don't smoke out a red-bellied, black snake next," said Bill, stoking the fire.

“By the look of Bruce, I don’t think he’ll stay too close to the hole,” laughed Bill’s dad. “He looks a bit shaken from his close call with the goanna.”

By this time, smoke was coming from the two hollow branches and the far end of the log but nothing was happening.

“Are you sure the rabbit’s in there?” Bill asked quietly. “It’s awful quiet. What if we give the log a bang with a big piece of wood?”

The drum was more successful than the fire. The rabbit shot right out between Bruce’s legs, raced across a patch of grass and disappeared down a hole in the ground. No-one was more surprised than Bruce. When he felt five pairs of eyes on him, all filled with disapproval and disappointment, he slunk off to seek refuge under a tree.

“Never mind, Bruce,” Bill called. “You can have Weet-Bix* while the other dogs have rabbit stew.”

On the way home, Bill’s dad managed to shoot a hare, making up for the one that got away. It was a useful afternoon as they had a meal for the hungry dogs plus two skins that would bring in a few dollars for a struggling family.

Bill’s mum had a good laugh when Bill told her about the rabbit running between Bruce’s legs.

“Well, it just shows, even dogs can lose concentration when there are other things going on,” she said. “I guess he was distracted by all the banging when your dad was hitting the log. Sometimes it’s hard to keep our minds on the job when there are other things going on around us.”



THE CHINA PEAR RAID

During Bill's three years in the old, slab cottage, he learned about the Australian bush and all the wildlife running, crawling, flying, slithering and hopping within. One feature of their country lifestyle was the old orchard behind the house, which produced a great variety of fruit. There were juicy purple plums, sour green apples, succulent slipstone peaches, apricots, guavas, mulberries, china pears and more. However, it was always a contest between Bill's family and the invading force of flying foxes.*

Some nights they would fly over in their thousands. The late evening sky would be almost black with the flying pirates who could wipe out an orchard in a night. Some farmers used shotguns while others would burn cow manure in drums, using the smoke to discourage the invaders.

During the war years, when everything was in short supply, most people depended on their orchards and gardens for survival. What they didn't eat fresh, they preserved in big, glass jars. Every farmhouse had a pantry with shelves lined





with preserved fruit and vegetables. When friends came to visit, the men showed off their latest cow or horse, while the women showed off their pantry. The preserves ensured each family had a good supply of fruit and vegetables to last all through the winter months.

Sometimes, farmers would stay up all night when a tree of fruit was nearly ripe. No-one wanted the flying foxes to invade their orchard to destroy a crop. The little beasts would eat a few mouthfuls of a peach or plum, then drop the fruit and pick another. In the morning, the tree would be stripped and the ground littered with half-eaten fruit.

At the back of Bill's orchard, there were two huge china pear trees. These were not fruit you would climb through a barbed wire fence to get to. They were hard and crisp. The only way you could tell if they were ripe was when they changed from green to yellow. They were never soft but, on occasions, could be juicy. China pears were best stewed or preserved and Bill's mum was clever at preserving them. Even so, they had to be picked at exactly the right time—and that was quite tricky.

One evening, Bill's dad walked into the kitchen and announced that the pears were about to ripen. "We will have to be on our guard, as the flying foxes are keeping watch as they fly over," he warned.

"I think there's plenty of time," Bill's mum said. "They still look very green to me."

"Maybe, but we need to check on them every day from now on."

"What are the signs we should look for?" Bill asked.

"There are just two," his dad replied. "The first is when they start to turn yellow. Also, if you see any half-eaten pears on the ground, you will know the flying foxes are keeping a

close eye on the pears as well. They are very cunning little thieves. They send spies out to check where there's ripening fruit. The spies sample the fruit until they think it is ready and then they tell their mates.* They all invade the orchard and in one night, the crop is ruined."

"It's like the signs in the Bible, telling us what we should look out for when it's time for Jesus to return. That's why we watch world events and keep our eyes open," explained Bill's dad.

Two days went by and still the pears weren't ripe. But early one morning, Bill went out to check the orchard on his way to feed his hens. There on the ground were two half-chewed pears so he ran inside, calling his mum.

"Mum, the flying foxes came last night to sample the pears! There are two on the ground half-chewed," he shouted.

His mum went out to investigate but felt that there was still time, as there were only a few going yellow. "They won't stew all that well if we pick them too early," she said. Bill thought his mum was pushing her luck but he had learned not to argue with her. She usually knew best.

The next day, there were more chewed pears on the ground and Bill's dad also felt it was time to pick the crop. "They're keeping a close eye on the fruit now and with the thousands passing over each night, we could lose the lot if they decide to pay us a visit," he reminded her.

But Bill's mum still wanted to wait for more yellow pears. Bill thought the signs were clear and suggested it was time to pick. "If there are a lot of yellow pears, the others must be close to ready, so why don't we harvest the tree tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'll check tomorrow and if they are ripe enough, we will pick them," his mum agreed.



That night, Bill woke up to a frightening racket of screeching, flapping and squabbling coming from the orchard. While he was too scared to go and see what all the noise was about, he knew the “thieves” had arrived. His dad went out banging a tin bucket with a spanner but it was too late.

The next morning, they surveyed the scene of devastation. Barely any fruit remained on the two trees and the ground was covered with damaged pears. Bill’s mum was so upset that Bill and his dad resisted saying, “We told you so.” Even the few pears left on the trees were damaged, so there were no pears left to preserve for that winter. It was a disappointment and a reminder to always take notice of the signs.



THE BLOODHOUNDS

On rare occasions, a kangaroo hopped through the bush near Bill's place. Bill loved to explore the bush near his house with his four dogs and while it had plenty of wallabies, but it was not kangaroo territory. It was always an event when a kangaroo turned up.

The time had come again for Bill to find his dogs some meat. Bill's dad was too busy to go out looking for rabbits and the dogs were tired of Weet-Bix. The night before, he came inside for his evening meal frowning and growling about big Bruce the curly-haired retriever.

"That big mutt has gone off again and taken the three females with him. They could get shot if they stray onto someone's property," he complained. "When they get hungry for fresh meat, who knows what they might attack?"

Bill was worried, too. He liked the dogs to be around, especially when he went for the cows. There were always two



or three cows sitting around chewing their cud as far away as possible. It was handy to be able to send the dogs off to round them up.

“Where do you think they might have gone to hunt?” Bill asked.

“They probably headed for the hills on the other side of the road where there are a few kangaroos,” his dad replied. “The trouble is, there are some dingoes up in those hills, too. The dogs could get injured if they stray into dingo territory.”

Bill and his parents waited patiently until, two days later, all four dogs came home. They looked very guilty with blood on their coats but they had no injuries. Their tummies were bulging, so their hunt must have been successful.

“I guess they’ll hang around now they’ve had a good hunt,” Bill’s mum said as she dished out Weet-Bix to the cat. Seeing it, the dogs turned up their noses and slunk away to find a shady place to sleep.

That evening, Bill’s dad had a few strong words with the dogs. Soon, all four were cringing with their tails between their legs. They knew they had done wrong but their full stomachs made them feel it was worth being growled at. Bill’s dad warned Bill, “Even people will steal and even kill to get food when they are starving.”

Because of the war, they had been hearing tragic stories of prisoners of war being starved to death in camps. Some soldiers had rioted in protest at the little or no food provided.

“Wars are terrible things,” Bill’s mum said. “They make people do things they normally wouldn’t do.”

The next day, Bill was surprised to see a big red kangaroo hopping right past the house. He looked tired as he hopped along, taking no notice of Bill or his mum. “It’s just as well the dogs are down the paddock with your dad. At the pace





he's going, our dogs would have had him down in no time."

They watched the kangaroo until it disappeared over the ridge, both feeling sad as they went inside. Not long after that, they heard a strange noise—a distant sound, like a dog howling. Everything went quiet for a while and then they heard it again.

"It sounds like more than one dog howling. I hope our dogs are OK."

They went back outside just in time to hear the sound again. It was getting closer and there was no sign of Bill's dad or their dogs. When the howls came again, louder and closer, they realised the sounds were coming from a different breed of dogs.

Bill felt the hairs lifting on the back of his neck as the haunting sound grew closer and louder. It seemed like time stood still between each howl. They saw three big dogs moving up the paddock with their noses to the ground, following along where the kangaroo had bounded by.

"They're bloodhounds," cried Bill's mum. "They're following the scent of the kangaroo."

"I wonder if any hunters are coming up behind," Bill whispered. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Nor have I—and I don't like what I see," she said as the bloodhounds came closer.

Bill decided to stand at the back fence to watch the action and get a closer look as the big dogs loped along, their long, floppy ears almost dragging on the ground. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the lead dog let out another bloodcurdling, "Arooooh." His companions followed his example, howling as they followed the trail.

That evening, as Bill and his parents sat around the meal table, they discussed the day's events.

“Do you think the hounds will catch up with the kangaroo, Dad?” asked Bill.

“No doubt about it,” he said. “Once they get a scent, they continue until they run down their prey. They have incredible stamina and persistence—they just go and go, and never give up. Remember to be like a bloodhound when you’re up against a challenge—keep your nose down and be persistent.”

“I couldn’t forget those bloodhounds, even if I wanted to,” said Bill. “I might learn persistence from them but I still feel sorry for the kangaroo.”

His parents smiled and nodded. Bill suspected they felt sorry for the kangaroo as well.



THROWING IN THE TOWEL

It was time for the annual agricultural fair—the Taree show.* Bill loved show time, a full day all about fun. He and his friends had saved up all their pocket money for this event. They were excited!

“Where should we go first?” he asked his mates. “The ring events are better in the afternoon. Why don't we check out the sideshows until lunchtime?”

Only Tom agreed.

“We’re not into ring events. We want to hang around the sideshows,” the others insisted.

“We can split up at lunchtime,” Bill suggested. So the four boys set off laughing and joking and ready for fun. Bill knew his money would run out by lunchtime anyway. His plan was to spend whatever he had left on food to enjoy in the stands while he and Tom watched the ring events.

Sideshow alley was always loud and bustling. People jostled





past gaudy tent fronts where all kinds of people coaxed the crowds to buy tickets to their shows. Bill and his mates knew most of the shows were not worth the entry fee and they had learned which performances were more worthwhile. They always enjoyed the performing animals. Next they chose the “Wild West” show, with its trick riding, whip cracking, clowns, target shooting, knife throwing and clever rope acts. It was always worth every shilling.

As they pushed their way through the crowd, they came across the boxing tent. This was one of the noisiest places to be. There was a high platform in front of the tent where six tough looking men of different sizes stood glaring at the crowd.

At the far end stood a muscle-bound heavyweight boxer. Next to him stood the middleweight, looking almost as menacing. They were lined up when they went down in size to the lightweight. Bill thought they all looked worse for wear. In the middle of all the boxers, a fat man stood ringing a loud bell for attention. At the end of the platform, a boxer stood in front of a big drum. Whenever the fat spruiker stopped for breath, the boxer banged away on his drum. Bill thought it was deafening.

As the crowd grew, the fat man called out for someone to challenge one of his fighters. He pointed to his troupe and offered 20 pounds for anyone who could stay three rounds with any of his men. After some more encouragement, one lad offered to have a go with the lightweight fighter and everyone cheered on the young contender.

Eventually all the men on the platform were matched with local boxing enthusiasts, except for the heavyweight. The fat man really tried to encourage the crowd to come up with a contender for his big man, but it seemed nobody wanted to spend time in hospital.

The fat man was getting desperate to put on a good show and attract a bigger crowd of customers. Just as he was about to continue his pitch, a voice from the edge of the crowd called out, "I'll take him on."

"Good on you, fellah,*" responded the fat man. "Come forward so we can have a good look at you."

A solid-looking Aboriginal* man stepped forward and his white companion followed him onto the platform. No-one knew the clean-shaven handsome young man who gazed calmly at the fat man holding the bell. Even though he was tall, he was no match in size to the heavyweight boxer.

"You think you can stay three rounds with my heavyweight boxer, do you? Where did you learn to fight?"

"I've done some training in Newcastle," the challenger replied. "But I wouldn't need much training to knock him out," he added as he pointed at the fat man's champion.

The onlookers roared with laughter while the boxer scowled, and the fat man huffed and turned red. The crowd leant forward eagerly and Bill watched too, breathless. The show was about to start and they hadn't bought their ticket yet. It was obvious the challenger was set on getting the boxing troupe stirred up. "I will fight your punch-drunk boxer on my terms," he offered. "If I knock him out inside three rounds, you give me 50 pounds but if he knocks me out I will give you 50 pounds."

This was a challenge the fat man couldn't refuse—especially not in front of more than 100 people who were just about jumping out of their shoes with excitement. Bill had never seen people so worked up. He thought the mob would have torn up the tent if the fat man had backed down.

"You have heard the man sounding off," shouted the fat man trying to hide his surprise. "What a super program we



have lined up for you. Get your tickets at the door and enjoy an hour's top entertainment."

Bill couldn't afford the ticket even if he skipped buying lunch and Tom was also getting low on money, so they went off to watch other sideshow activities. However, Bill's other two mates promised to describe the bouts when they all met up for lunch.

Bill and Tom were happily munching their way through their sandwiches when their mates arrived, looking like they had seen a plane crash. "That was something else," they gasped together. "It was amazing."

The boys described the first five fights as more like sparring bouts and like the rest of the crowd, they realised they had been conned. It was obvious the volunteer fighters were members of the troupe. There was a lot of booing and people calling for their money back. They only stayed on to see the star attraction.

"The Aboriginal boxer came out wearing a pair of silk shorts, looking like a professional!" Bill's friend said. "The white man acted as his second and made sure everything was above board. He even checked the heavyweight's gloves."

"When the bell went, the heavyweight rushed at the challenger, straight into a full punch to his jaw," exclaimed the other excited boy, butting in to tell the tale. "Then they exchanged a few blows but the Aborigine was far too good for the heavyweight."

"You should have seen how fast he was. The big guy didn't know what hit him half the time," added the first boy. "By the end of the second round, he could hardly see where his opponent was. He was looking worse for wear and wobbly."

"So what happened?" Bill asked. "Did they go for a third round?"

"No, the fat man walked out and threw a towel into the ring."

"What does that mean?" asked Tom.

"Well, it meant that the fat man's heavyweight had given up—you know, 'throwing in the towel,'" said the first boy. "And were the people angry! They needed the whole boxing troupe to control the crowd. They only calmed down when the fat man walked over and handed the challenger a cheque for 50 pounds. Everyone clapped after that."

"I guess the fat man was angry at having to pay up!" Tom said.

"He probably did OK for money out of the crowd but it must have been humiliating to see this stranger give his prize fighter a hiding," added Bill. "This 'throwing in the towel' interests me."

"Well," said Rex, "it's the way a boxer shows he's given up. He sure was outskilled. That'll teach the troupe for being such con artists. I bet that crowd learnt not to judge a boxer by his cover!"

"Now they say 'throwing in your towel' for other things, when people give up on something," Rex added.

"Wonder what would have happened if that so-called heavyweight hadn't thrown in the towel! If you want to be a boxer, you should train properly," Tom said.

"And you get to keep all your towels," Bill finished with a grin.



THE OLD SLEEPER CUTTER

As the days came and went, Bill's love for country living increased. He loved the animals, the birds that sang their melodious songs, the simple lifestyle—even the chores that kept him busy. One of the enjoyable distractions were the interesting characters that lived around the district.

Just a few miles along the Forster road, there lived an Italian man who had married an Australian lady. He was keeping his head down, as most of the other Italians had been arrested and imprisoned until the war ended. This was because Italy had joined the war and were fighting on the other side, against the Australians.

Bill liked to visit the family to play with their son, who was his age. Bill would watch with fascination as the Italian rolled his own cigarettes. He would roll them with the paper at an angle, so that he ended up with a cigarette with a small end for his mouth and a large end to light. Bill suspected smoking

was a costly way to kill yourself but found it interesting how people would go to so much trouble just to be able to blow smoke from their mouths and noses. He also wondered why people put up with a house smelling worse than burnt rubber.

On the south side of their property lived an old bachelor who had developed some even more fascinating habits. The old man would wear his overalls until they could stand up by themselves. Bill wondered if he did actually bathe once a week, as he claimed. If so, it was obviously not enough.

Bill enjoyed visiting the old chap, as he was full of stories. It didn't matter to Bill how far-fetched the stories were. The wallpaper also kept Bill entertained, as the old man had lined each room of his house with newspapers. Bill loved the bedroom the best—it was papered with comics and to read some sections, Bill had to stand on his head or crawl under the bed.

For company, the old man had a tired-looking dog, exhausted from all his scratching. There was also a tabby tomcat that hated Bill's dogs. When he arched his back, they all knew it was time to back off. For Bill, the best part of the visit was checking on the old man's bantam hens. He had Chinese Silkies, with feathers growing up and down their legs, and multicoloured bantams that laid big, brown eggs. Nearly every time he visited the old man, he would go home with a new bantam hen under his arm.

"Not another hen," Bill's mum would joke as he showed off his latest prize. "Where will you put this one?"

"I'll get Dad to help me build another yard. We have seven bantams now and they're better layers than the big hens."

"Yes they are. And what's more, they make great mothers."

"They sure do," agreed Bill. "The silky has eight white leghorn chicks all nearly as big as her."



Just opposite the post office lived another old bachelor with a savage blue heeler.* Bill didn't visit him very often, as he was a bit grumpy. But when Bill did choose to visit, the old man would send him home with a bag of peas or beans. He had a large vegetable garden where he grew his own vegetables and he also grew beans for the town market.

After the first picking, the old man would leave a message at the post office for Bill to come and pick some young beans. The old man enjoyed helping Bill pick the small beans the pickers had left behind.

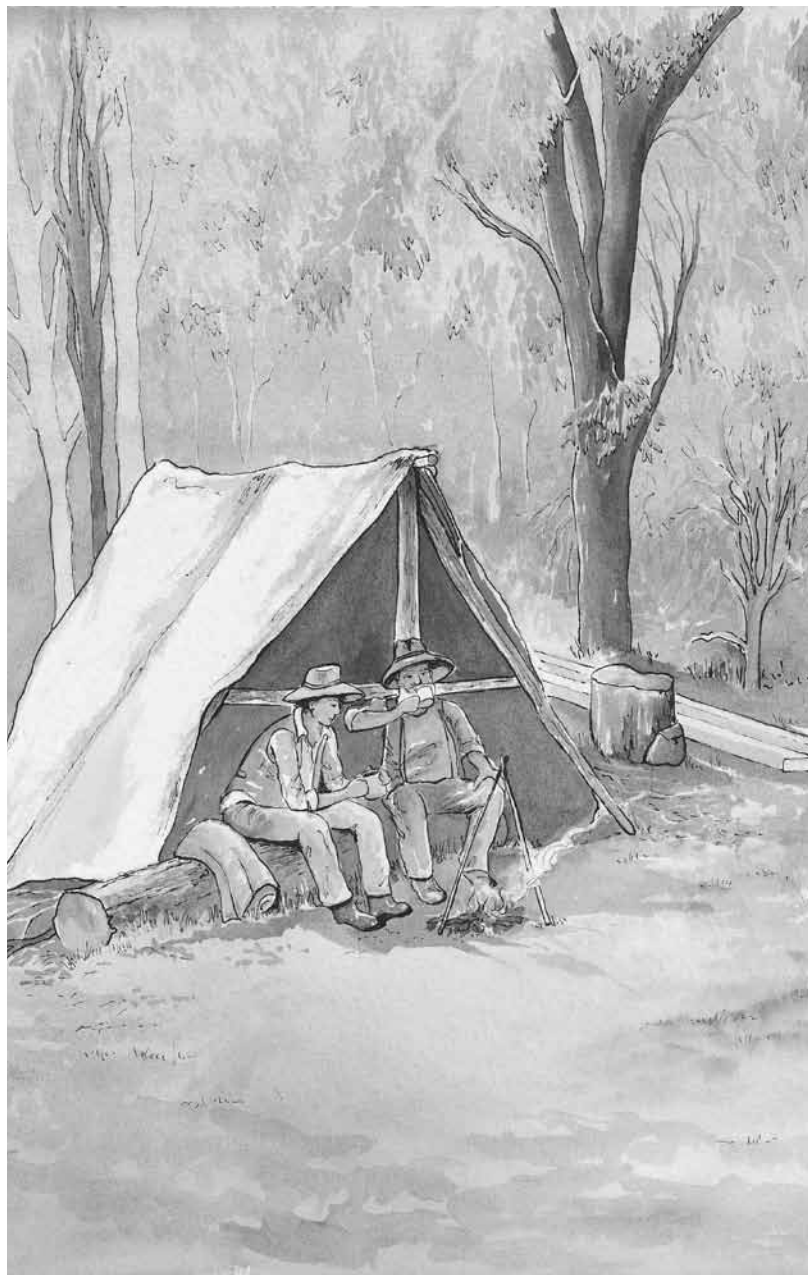
"There you are, lad," he would say. "Half a sugar bag of nice fresh beans! That should make your mother happy."

"Hmm! Yes, beans for dinner tonight, with potatoes and mashed pumpkin," Bill said. "We don't have much luck with beans in our garden. There are too many snails and slugs."

Bill felt sorry for the old chap, who seemed very lonely. He wondered why he had no animals for company. The Postmaster reckoned the old man couldn't afford to feed any animals. Times were hard back in the 1940s if people didn't have family looking after them.

Up in the bush, across the road from their slab cottage, lived a third bachelor—Bill's favourite. Bill often rode his bike along the winding bush track that led up to the old sleeper cutter's tent. Jock was a real old timer who had spent all his life in the bush. He never went near towns and kept away from people as much as possible.

Bill had never met anything that could compare with old Jock's lifestyle. His clothes were threadbare and it was obvious the old man tried to keep them together because everything pulled strangely from his mending efforts. His shoes were collapsing beneath him, their heels worn away. Everything he owned cluttered up his little tent, with just enough room for





his stretcher bed and a space for him to sit down.

Old Jock's "dining room" was out under the flap of his tent, with a round section of log for a seat and an old, rickety table. He had fly-proof storage that hung from a branch of a spreading wattle tree and he soaked the rope with kerosene to stop ants climbing down it to devour his food supply.

Bill thought watching Jock eat was a fascinating experience and he would sit on a stump close to Jock's table for the performance. Everything Jock ate was stale, with a strange smell. Bill never saw him eat fresh vegetables but sometimes, he would open a tin of peas or tomatoes. All his supplies were delivered by a kind bus driver and though the bread and meat came three times a week, they were soon stale. Jock had an old prune tin in which he kept his dripping.

When Jock ate, he stood the loaf of bread up on end. After giving his dog the crust, he covered the end of the loaf with dripping, then added a thick slice of meat. Using his sharp knife with amazing skill, he would cut off a thick slice from the loaf. Sometimes, Jock would need to remove invading wrigglers from the meat before he sliced it. When the meat was too green even for Jock, he fed it to his dog and opened a tin of baked beans. He often offered a slice to Bill but, apart from everything else, the smell of the dripping was too much for Bill.

Old Jock earned his living by cutting sleepers, which he sold to the railway people. He was very skilful at cutting down trees with his axe, then cutting up the logs with a one-man crosscut saw. He would then use steel wedges to hammer into the log with a heavy sledgehammer. It was all hard work but the result was almost magical. Next to his tent lay a pile of perfectly cut sleepers, all exactly six feet (1.8 metres) long, two feet (60 centimetres) wide and four

inches (10 centimetres) thick. The sleepers were used for cross beams and train tracks were laid on top of them by the railway workers. They were used for both new tracks and repairing old ones. Bill admired the neatness of Jock's work, done with rough tools and a straight eye.

The sleepers were so heavy that Bill couldn't even lift one end higher than his knees. Yet old Jock carried them down to his tent from wherever he had cut the tree. Some of the trees were enormous gum trees that made a loud crashing "thump" when they fell. Working in the bush was Jock's whole life and he worked seven days a week. It was only very heavy rain that would force him to stay in his tent.

Bill often wondered what Jock did for a bath but never asked. When he asked if the old man had ever married, he just shook his head. He never talked about his past and Bill found this surprising, as his other bachelor friends talked about nothing else. Instead, Jock talked about the bush—he loved the birds and the animals he observed each day. He had names for the possums that came to visit each night and he even had some wallaby friends. Jock used to handfeed a huge goanna.

Jock's world was a special place that was very different to the other two bachelors. It was a place where Bill felt welcome—a world away from the war and strife people got themselves into. It was a world of kindness and solitude—a secret garden Bill never forgot. Of the three bachelors, the old sleeper cutter taught Bill the most about the natural world around him. His simple life in the bush gradually made Bill realise that though Jock appeared to have the least, he really had more than most.



WEDDING BLUES

Bill was invited to be a pageboy and he wasn't sure if he liked the idea or not. First, he decided he needed to know exactly what was involved.

"Well!" explained Bill's mum. "Molly and Bernie are getting married at Wingham in a couple of weeks. There will be a wedding party with bridesmaids, groomsmen, a flower girl and a pageboy."

"But aren't pageboys usually smaller kids?" Bill frowned. "I'm too old to get fancied up and walk down the aisle of a church. I would look ridiculous."

"You're only nine and so is Joy, who will be the flower girl," his mum smiled encouragingly.

"So, do I have to get measured up for an outfit? Do I have to practise walking down the aisle and all that?"

"The wedding's during school holidays, so you will travel to Wingham and stay with the Mackenzies until the big event. It will be exciting, you'll see. It'll be a big wedding with lots of guests from all over."

The more Bill's mum raved, the more Bill wished he could find a way to get out of being part of the "big event." When Bill and his parents travelled by bus and train to the Wingham church, everyone was talking about the wedding. All the young people thought Bill was lucky to be part of the wedding party, so Bill kept his thoughts to himself.

"They will look so nice, Bill and Joy as pageboy and flower girl," cooed one old lady. "Bill will look smart in a satin suit and Joy with her big soft eyes will make such a pretty sight."

Bill hadn't heard anything about a satin suit before, as his mum had kept that bit of news to herself. Bill was wondering what else he was in for. He didn't feel any better when he heard he would be carrying a satin cushion with the wedding ring balanced on top. It was all a bit much for Bill and there seemed to be no escape.

When he had a chance, Bill asked Molly what was expected of him.

"Oh," she smiled. "You'll be the smartest-looking boy in town when we get you all dressed up. You will have a new shirt, satin trousers and a waistcoat, with a flower in the lapel, and shiny new shoes. You and Joy will be the first to walk down the aisle, then stand to greet the bridesmaids as they walk in. Doesn't that sound exciting?"

"I feel a bit nervous about it but I guess it will work out OK," replied Bill.

"You don't have a thing to worry about," assured Molly. "We will all be there as a group, supporting each other and having the time of our lives."

Over the next few days, Bill struggled with the image of himself in a white satin suit. He was glad Wingham was a long way from Forster—he would never live it down if any of his mates saw him dressed like that! It was too late to back



out now anyway, as he was staying on at the McKenzie home until the wedding.

Bill couldn't help being caught up in all the excitement of shopping, fittings, preparations, materials and sewing machines. Then the day came when he was fitted out with his new gear and, when he looked in the mirror, he got a real shock.

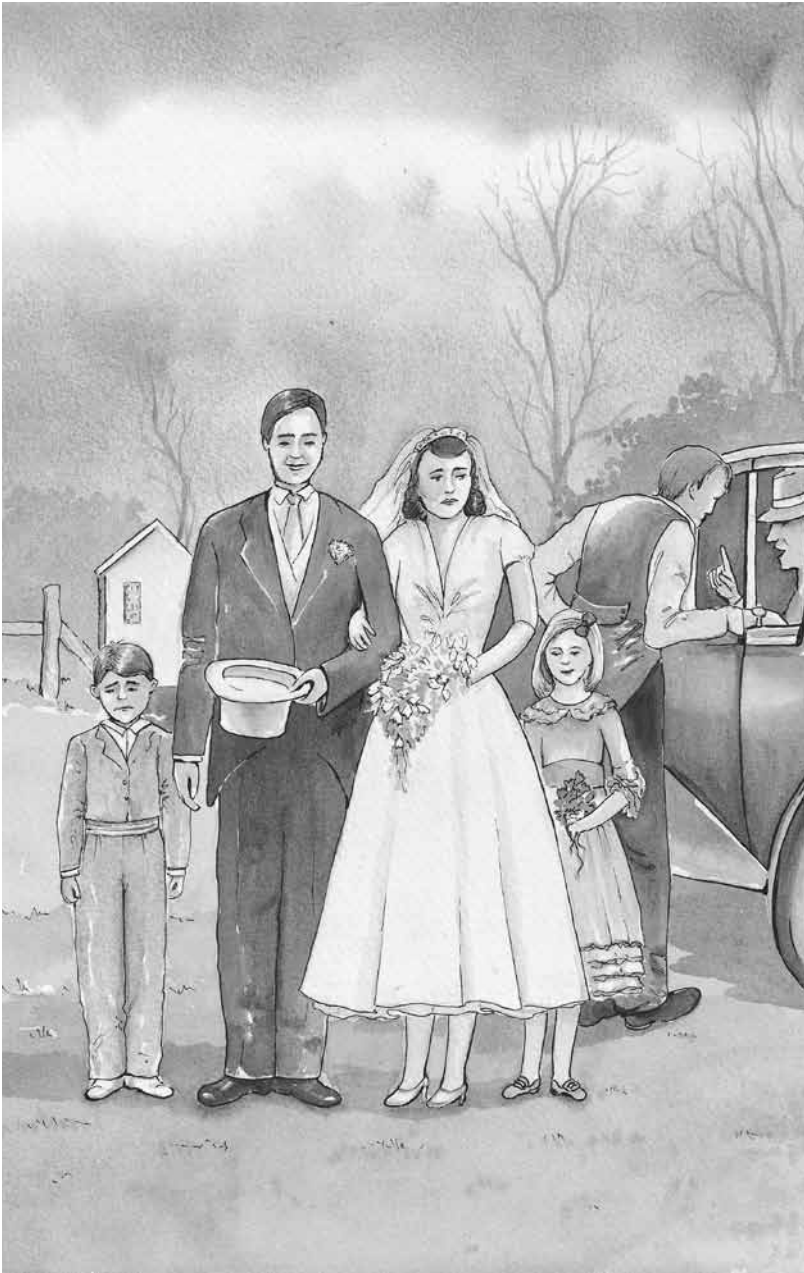
What a ponce, he thought, as he considered the shiny, satin suit. *The collar is too high and too stiff. I will have to walk around with my head in the air. I look a real sissy.*

Joy was much more excited with her frilly pink dress, fancy stockings, new shoes with a big buckle and special headgear. "She thinks she's some sort of princess," muttered Bill. "She can't stop talking to the mirror."

The small congregation usually met in an old hall near the railway station, so they had arranged to have the wedding in the Presbyterian church. The practice went off hitch-free but Bill was intimidated by the huge building. It had a big pipe organ, hard wooden seats and a huge expanse of carpet. Stained-glass windows allowed colour and light to pierce the gloomy interior.

Two days before the big day, Bernie the groom turned up. That's when all the "love-dovey" stuff started, and Bill and Joy started playing a game called "spot the love birds." Poor Molly and Bernie didn't get much peace with two sets of eyes peeking around corners, up from under tables or from shrubs in the garden.

Bill had lived a sheltered life, so all these sudden displays of affection came as a shock. He had never seen so much cuddling and kissing. "I'll be glad when this wedding's over and I can go home to a normal life," he confessed to Joy. "I think I've done enough spying. This mushy stuff is a bit much."





“This wedding has disturbed everything. It has really taken over our lives,” she agreed.

When the big day finally arrived, it was a great relief. Everyone rose early, as there was much to do. The church had to be decorated, the reception hall prepared, ironing, the to-do list checked and last minute details sorted.

A phone call was made to the pastor to confirm his appointment as the officiating minister and to remind him of the need to be early. It was presumed he would leave in plenty of time, as he had to drive all the way from Newcastle. But at last, the moment came. Everyone was ready—almost.

There was an air of nervous expectation as the minutes ticked by. Then they continued to tick, louder. Too many minutes ticked by—lots and lots of them. The wedding was set for 5 o’clock and by 5.30, the preacher still had not arrived.

Bill’s dad was the MC—master of ceremonies—as well as director of events, pacifier, troubleshooter and public relations manager. He was rushing between the church and the house, where the bridal party were anxiously waiting for instructions. All he could say was, “Just stay calm and relax. I’m sure the pastor will be here soon.”

“Soon” stretched into, “very soon.” There was still no sign of the missing minister, nor was there any word about where he was or reasons for the delay. By 6 o’clock, impatient shuffling feet became stamping feet, accompanied by strong words.

Bill’s dad was struggling to keep everyone happy. The men at the church were restless, annoyed and embarrassed. Mixed emotions filled the house as the minutes dragged by. By 7 o’clock, the pastor was two hours late and it was time for something to be done.

"We can't wait any longer," insisted Bill's dad. "We'll have to ask the Presbyterian minister to conduct the ceremony. The caterers are upset, not to mention the drivers! The day is being ruined and we have to do something!"

"If the men agree, it's OK with me," declared Molly. "We're all tired of waiting."

"Good!" said Bill's dad. "You all get in your cars and I will hurry over to the church to make final arrangements." Bill was glad something was happening at last. He was weary of listening to the complaining bridal party and his neck was hurting from holding his head up to avoid getting chafed by the stiff collar.

The kindly Presbyterian minister conducted an excellent wedding service, putting everyone back in a happy mood for the reception. It was 8 o'clock when the wedding party and guests were finally seated. Then the eating and drinking began, and the speeches came and went. Everyone was in a forgiving mood and enjoying themselves, when the pastor arrived.

"Who's in charge?" he demanded. "How come you went ahead without me?"

"We're relieved to see you," smiled Bill's dad. "We thought you'd been in an accident. It was the only thing we could think of to explain why you didn't arrive on time. We waited for two hours and finally decided to ask the Presbyterian minister to officiate."

Bill's dad was surprised to see how upset the pastor was over their failure to wait for him. He steered him into a quiet corner and shared a few thoughts with him about arriving at nearly 10 o'clock. He told him how unreasonable it would be to expect everyone to wait for five hours or more, without any idea of whether he was turning up or not. Bill thought he



overheard his dad suggest he might be able to say the closing prayer.

Everyone had thoughts for the happiness of the bride and bridegroom, and had forgotten the stress of the missing pastor—everyone except for the man himself. For Bill, being a page boy was an experience never to be forgotten—or repeated.



THE BUS ACCIDENT

Back in the 1940s and 50s, hardly anyone had their own car. They mostly travelled by bus and train. When Bill's mum wanted to go shopping in Taree, she and Bill went by bus. The journey took longer than an hour as the bus bumped its way over the rough gravel road. It wasn't a long distance but the trip was always an adventure.

Lots of interesting people lived along the bus route. Some lived in old shacks, while others lived in farm houses quite a long way from the road. There were a few who just stood on the side of the road by their mailboxes, waiting for the bus with no sign of any dwelling to be seen. When they got off the bus, it seemed they just disappeared into the bush.

Some people rode in silence, while others made up for them by talking the whole way into town. Passengers ranged from smart to scruffy in their dress and Bill always tried to avoid the unwashed passengers. He could never understand how people could join a bus full of people smelling like they had just walked out of a cow yard after milking time.



Bill's mum always enjoyed the weekly shopping trip. "That bus trip is the highlight of the week," she would say. "I've never seen a more interesting group of people anywhere in all my life."

"This bus collects a real motley bunch," Bill agreed. "I wouldn't be surprised if Ned Kelly's gang used to travel on our bus."

Around the time when World War II was ending, many buses were barely hanging together. A new bus was top news and would attract quite a crowd. The buses had hard seats that got harder as the miles went by. The only air conditioning was an open window that would also cover everyone in dust.

Even worse than the farm smells and dust was the tobacco smoke. In those days, people smoked everywhere—in buses, taxis, cafes, shops—even in other people's homes. No-one had any idea that tobacco smoke could do harm. It was an accepted habit and too bad for anyone who didn't like it. People were dying of lung cancer but no-one wanted to blame smoking.

So when the air got too foul for Bill, he would open a window. He decided the dust was better than the smoke. He always got into trouble from passengers who objected to the dust more than the tobacco. Bill's mum sat in the front, so she could chat with the ladies but Bill preferred to sit down the back, where he had a good view of everyone and everything.

It was always a drama when a bus got a puncture. Bill would be out of the bus like a shot to watch as the bus cleared of passengers. It was fun to watch and listen to the complaints, laughter and confusion.

"Please stand well away from the bus while it is jacked up for the tyres to be changed," the bus driver would call out. "It won't take long, so please be patient and we'll be as quick





as possible.” In spite of his reassurance, it took some effort to undo the brackets holding the spare tyre, drag the huge thing out and lean it against the bus while it was jacked up. But there were usually plenty of willing hands ready to assist the driver with the dusty task.

Others would amuse themselves in different ways. Some would stand in the shade of a tree or find a log to sit on. Some would go for a walk up the road until the bus came along to collect them. Bill would search for old bottles or tins, which he would put on rocks or fence posts for target practice.

There were times when even the spare was flat, when someone was sick or someone drunk and disorderly. But one day, there was an adventure that nearly ended all Bill's adventures. A mysterious new bus turned up and it was the ugliest machine Bill had ever seen. It had a huge bonnet, hiding a savage engine that sounded more like an injured bullock. It had two over-sized headlights, a monstrous front bumper, a grill that looked like a prison door and army truck wheels. People were hesitant to get on board.

“Don't be nervous,” encouraged the driver. “It's quite safe. I had a practice run in it yesterday and she can really move! It should cut 15 minutes off the travelling time.” The passengers discussed their concerns about getting there at all, not how long it would take.

“It looks pretty ancient,” a passenger said warily. “Where in the world did they find this beast?”

“It was shipped out from England with a boatload of redundant vehicles. It's very comfortable to travel in,” assured the driver.

The seats were surprisingly comfortable and the windows were much larger than most buses. It soon earned the nickname “Ugly Duckling,” though Bill was sure it would

never evolve into a majestic swan. It was on its third trip when Bill and his mum had their first ride. The owner of the bus company was driving, as the regular driver was sick. It was his first experience at driving the strange contraption.

The road from Forster to Taree was hilly, with some sharp and slippery corners. On this particular day, the bus left late because there was more freight than usual. It was obvious to Bill that the driver was in a hurry. They were doing speeds that they were not used to in any bus and as they headed into the hills, the driver also took the corners faster than usual. Bill forgot to watch the other passengers or his usual worry about dust and smoke. He hung on tight, watching the road uneasily. How could the driver know the bus well enough to manage the dangerous corners!

"I'm not sure about this driver," he whispered to his mum as he moved forward to sit with her. "He's going too fast around these corners. Do you think he knows the road?"

His mum had also started holding on tightly, her face pinched. They weren't the only ones looking nervous. The passengers were all quiet as the bus reached the top of the range and began to descend to the Manning flats. The driver was leaning forward, tightly gripping the steering wheel with a determined look on his face as he put the old bus through its paces. He looked like he was trying to break a record.

Halfway down the slope was the worst corner of the journey. It was a long, sharp corner that a lot of drivers enjoyed spinning out on, scattering gravel all over the road. As the bus reached the centre of the corner, it began to slide! It felt like the back of the bus started trying to race the front. In spite of the driver's efforts, the bus began facing the steep side of the road, where gravel heaped up in front of thick scrub.* The ugly bus took complete control. It jumped the



gravel bank, leapt wildly into the scrub and bulldozed a small tree all the way up to a post-and-wire fence.

“Hold on,” shouted the driver as he wrestled the steering wheel and stomped on the brakes. The trouble was, there was nothing to hold on to anymore. All the seats shook loose and as the bus bucked and jolted its way to a stop, the passengers were tossed about like rag dolls. There was a confused jumble of people, seats, luggage and freight. Years of accumulated dust fell over the chaos.

The situation was made worse by the terrified screams and groans of injured passengers. It seemed an age before some of the passengers managed to free themselves and scramble over the jumble to open the door. Seats had to be pulled out so passengers could escape. Passing motorists stopped to help, while others drove off to alert the bus company. One driver rushed to the nearest farmhouse to call for ambulances.

Bill found his mum on the floor under a seat, unhurt. “Hang on, Mum,” he encouraged. He lifted the seat while she wriggled free. “Are you OK? Are you hurt?” he cried.

“I seem to be all in one piece,” she muttered. “But I’ll have some whopping bruises.”

“We can’t get out until they pull all the stuff out and work their way back to us,” Bill explained.

It’s just as well the bus didn’t catch fire, he thought. He decided it wasn’t a good thing to mention it out loud while they were trapped in all the jumble of stuff.

A team of men worked to clear seats and rubble. Removing the injured took time, as some were in a bad way and in a lot of pain. The first ambulance arrived when most of the passengers were sitting or lying on the grass. People were in shock, crying or moaning. Some sat in the bus seats, which now looked more like escaped armchairs. Others

stood around in a daze, sucking away at their cigarettes in an attempt to calm their nerves.

The driver was lying under a tree where he was being treated by a medic. Bill could see blood on his head and imagined there would be other injuries. A few passengers released their anger on the hapless bus owner as the medic fitted the bandage.

About two hours after the accident, a relief bus arrived to collect the able passengers and take them on to Taree. Some didn't feel much like shopping, so a special bus was made available to return people back to Forster. Bill and his mum decided to stay and do what they had planned but were glad to get home that evening. It was a bus ride they would never forget.

"I think that driver will be in trouble over his performance in the 'Ugly Duckling' today," said Bill's mum as they sat around the meal table. "He was crazy to take such risks just to make up for lost time. Life is more important than speed records."

Bill's dad had a lot to say that was better not repeated. However, Bill learned some valuable lessons for when he would be the one driving. They all thanked God for sparing their lives, as the accident could have been a lot worse.



BLUEY AND THE K-9 REGIMENT

Three days a week, 10-year-old Bill rode his bike two miles (about 3 kilometres) to the little bush post office. The weekly newspaper and other important items he collected brightened up his parents' lives and kept them in touch with what was happening in the outside world. This was important because their 400-acre property halfway between Taree and Forster was isolated. There was always much excitement when letters arrived from friends. It was also an important time to keep up with the news. World War II affected everyone, and reached its ugly fist through to the remote Australian countryside.

It didn't matter how interesting the mail was, Bill hated going to the post office. This had nothing to do with letters and everything to do with the postmaster's dog, a savage blue heeler. Bill never had any trouble going in to collect the mail—the problems started when he would try to leave. The dog hid under the old wooden building, waiting. Bill

would get on his bike as quickly as possible but he was never fast enough. Snarling and growling, the dog rushed at Bill, chasing him and trying to bite his legs or the back tyre of his bike. Bill used to send gravel flying in trying to get away but the dog would fly after him like a greyhound on a racetrack.

Many times, Bill's mother had to act as nurse when he arrived home. His leg began to get scars from the attacks. Sometimes the dog even managed to puncture his tyre, forcing Bill to walk home. He'd push his bike as he walked, feeling sorry for himself. He knew there were soldiers far away bravely fighting a war but he felt more concerned with his own private war with a canine.

Finally, he decided he needed to say something. After shutting the wooden screen door on its rusty hinges, Bill marched up to the postmaster. There were two other customers chatting to him about the troops but Bill had ridden all the way from home promising himself that this time he would say something.

"Sir, your dog is attacking me every time I leave," Bill began. The postmaster looked at the small frowning boy in his farm clothes and smiled patiently.

"Ol' Bluey's just playing," he said with a chuckle. "He doesn't mean any harm."

Before Bill could show him the damage old Bluey had done to his leg, one of the customers adjusted his bracers and said importantly, "He's only doing his job, guarding his territory. Be a good soldier that dog!"

"Well, he thinks I'm the enemy," Bill complained. The adults returned to their conversation, seemingly uninterested in his terrors. Bill knew he had to solve this for himself.

He tried different strategies.

First, he tried approaching the post office with stealth,



tiptoeing in and silently closing the door behind him. As soon as he had collected his mail, Bill would quietly cross the verandah, mount his bike and cycle off, wobbling in his haste. But the dog was always ready to charge after Bill with all his fury. As usual, Bill went home in need of medical care.

His mother was bemused by the attacks. “Is it something you do? Do you shout at him? Have you ever thrown anything at him?” she asked.

“No, of course not, why would I?” Bill said. He loved dogs and had four of his own.

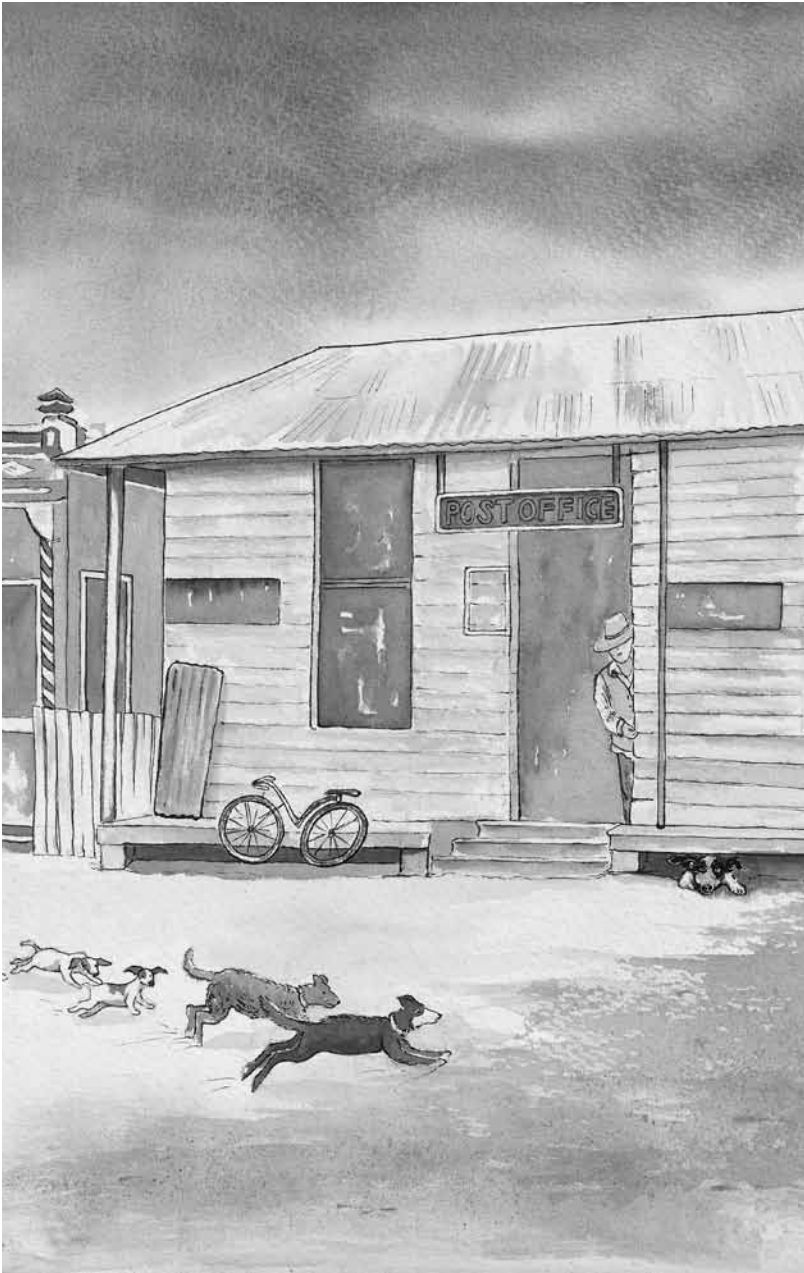
Bill’s father’s work—making charcoal for “the War effort”—kept him busy and his mother did many of the jobs a farmer would often do. He could not get them to go to the post office instead—it was his job. They believed it was good for him to conquer his fears but Bill was beginning to feel like a losing soldier with all the wounds he had endured from the enemy.

His next tactic was arming himself with a big stick. The dog merely grabbed it, getting even more vicious. He tried walking instead of cycling, just in case it was the bike that somehow offended Bluey. If he walked or rode, was armed or approached with stealth, it made no difference. The dog just had it in for Bill. If Bill growled or shouted at the dog, Bluey charged all the same.

One day, Bill was loaded up with a bundle of letters, papers and rolled-up magazines. He was attempting to balance all the mail and mount his bike when Bluey charged. Bill wasn’t even mobile when he felt the teeth sink into his leg, gripping him like a steel trap.

“Get off!” Bill yelled as he tried to hit the dog with his mailbag. But no matter what he did, Bluey held on.

“Help! Help! Call your dog off,” Bill cried. The postmaster walked out onto the veranda and laughed at the sight of his





dog holding Bill's leg.

"He's only playing. He won't hurt you, you big sook," scoffed the postmaster.

Bill held back tears from the searing burn of dog's teeth cutting into his leg. Bill couldn't believe the man just stood there, refusing to help and adding insults as well. It was too much for his 10-year-old sense of justice. Outraged and helpless, Bill began to sob and plead for the heartless man to call off his dog.

"Come, Bluey," the man finally called. Then he turned on his heels and walked inside, the dog obeying his master and trotting back to his hideaway.

Bill's mum had to dress and bandage his leg again when Bill had cycled, red-eyed, back to their house. He had to limp his way up to the feed shed when it was time to feed and water the hens. He was feeling angry and sorry for himself when his dad came in for the evening meal.

"Look at my leg, Dad," Bill whined. "Bluey attacked me again today."

"You had better wear your gumboots next time," his dad laughed, turning up the old radio and starting to eat. Bill felt like everyone was against him. He was outraged at the dog, the dog's owner and his own parents for not doing anything about it. Even the officers in the army thought twice about sending their soldiers into the same danger over and over again.

As he sat on the back steps, watching the sunset, he realised it was his own private war and no-one was going to help him. Tears welled in his eyes again. His four dogs came up for a pat and a chance to lick his hand. They knew when he was miserable about something and surrounded him soothingly.

"What would I do without you? You wouldn't let me down," he told them, burying his face in the black, curly fur of his

biggest dog, Bruce the retriever. Suddenly, Bill had a flash of inspiration. He laughed aloud at his genius. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before. He had his own "guard dogs." He didn't have to face the terror alone!

He actually looked forward to the next mail day. He cycled off whistling, his heart beating faster in anticipation of his plan. And this time, he was not alone. A rear guard followed him. His faithful pack of canine friends bounded along behind him, exploring and sniffing along the way. Bruce the retriever, Trixy the cattle dog and the two fox terriers, always with plenty of fight in them despite their size, loped around him joyfully.

The dogs had always wanted to accompany Bill on his trips to the post office but he made them stay at home for fear of the traffic. It was hard to control four dogs while riding a bike, especially as they had a habit of chasing after rabbits or wallabies whenever they were out and about. But Bill was keen to teach Bluey a lesson he wouldn't forget. He just hoped his dogs were not in the mood to chase cars.

When Bill arrived at the post office, there was no sign of Bluey. He leant his bike against the fence and went inside for the mail. But as soon as Bill disappeared, his dogs went off exploring. Bluey woke up and growled from his hideout with the spiders in the darkness under the building. When Bill came out with the mail, he couldn't see his dogs anywhere. He didn't want to call them and give away his plan to either the postmaster or Bluey, so he turned his bike toward the road and got ready to take off. Bluey shot like a cannon ball from under the post office and, with a savage growl he lunged at Bill. For one heartbeat of panic, Bill thought his plan had failed.

He never knew where his dogs came from but before Bluey could clamp his teeth onto Bill's leg, a 16-legged bundle of



fury hit Bluey and rolled him in the dirt. A furious pack of loyal dogs attacked with military precision, using teeth instead of rifles. He knew they would protect their master.

Hearing the vicious fracas, the postmaster rushed out to see what was happening. At first, he could not make out anything in the snarling swirling dog war. Then, he saw Bluey in the centre. A pack of dogs were mauling his prize guard dog! He cried out in protest, rushed inside for his broom and waded into the battle. Bill called his dogs off and reluctantly, they eased away from Bluey.

“What’s the idea of bringing your savage mongrels with you?” shouted the angry postmaster. “They could have killed Bluey.”

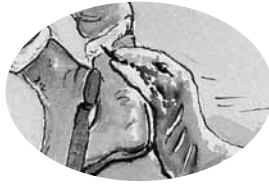
“Oh, no, they’re just playing, they don’t mean any harm,” said Bill with a grin.

By the look of Bluey’s condition, the “play” had taken away his personal vendetta against Bill. He limped back to his dark hiding place, whimpering and looking to his master for sympathy.

“Don’t you ever bring those dogs with you again, do you hear?” snarled the postmaster. His teeth were bared in anger and Bill thought that owners really are sometimes like their dogs. He would be proud to be like any of his dogs. Bill lifted his trousers and showed the postmaster his scars, the most recent one still an angry red. He finally had the man’s attention.

“My dogs were only doing what good dogs do—they were protecting their master. I promise not to bring my dogs again if you promise to chain up your dog when I come for the mail.”

That night, Bill sat on the porch, with his dogs, filled with a sense of pride. He had won a small battle and cured at least one injustice in the world.



BILL'S DAD GETS A FRIGHT

Bill's English-born-and-bred dad was quite a character. Bill learned a lot from his dad and at times he learned what not to do, as well as gaining helpful hints along the way. Bill's dad often made friendly jokes at Bill's expense. He was full of funny sayings and impossible stories. One moonlit night, when they were out searching for a stray cow, Bill's dad pointed to the moon and explained that it was made of cheese. It was some time before Bill discovered the truth. Another time, when Bill's dad had devoured his dinner in record time, Bill pointed out that he would get indigestion from eating his food so fast.

"Don't worry, Bill," he smiled. "I have a second set of teeth in my stomach that finishes the job!"

Bill hardly ever saw his dad frightened. One time was when lightning struck a huge dead gum tree only 50 yards away from where they were walking. Bill's dad had been trying to tell him there was no need to fear a thunderstorm and



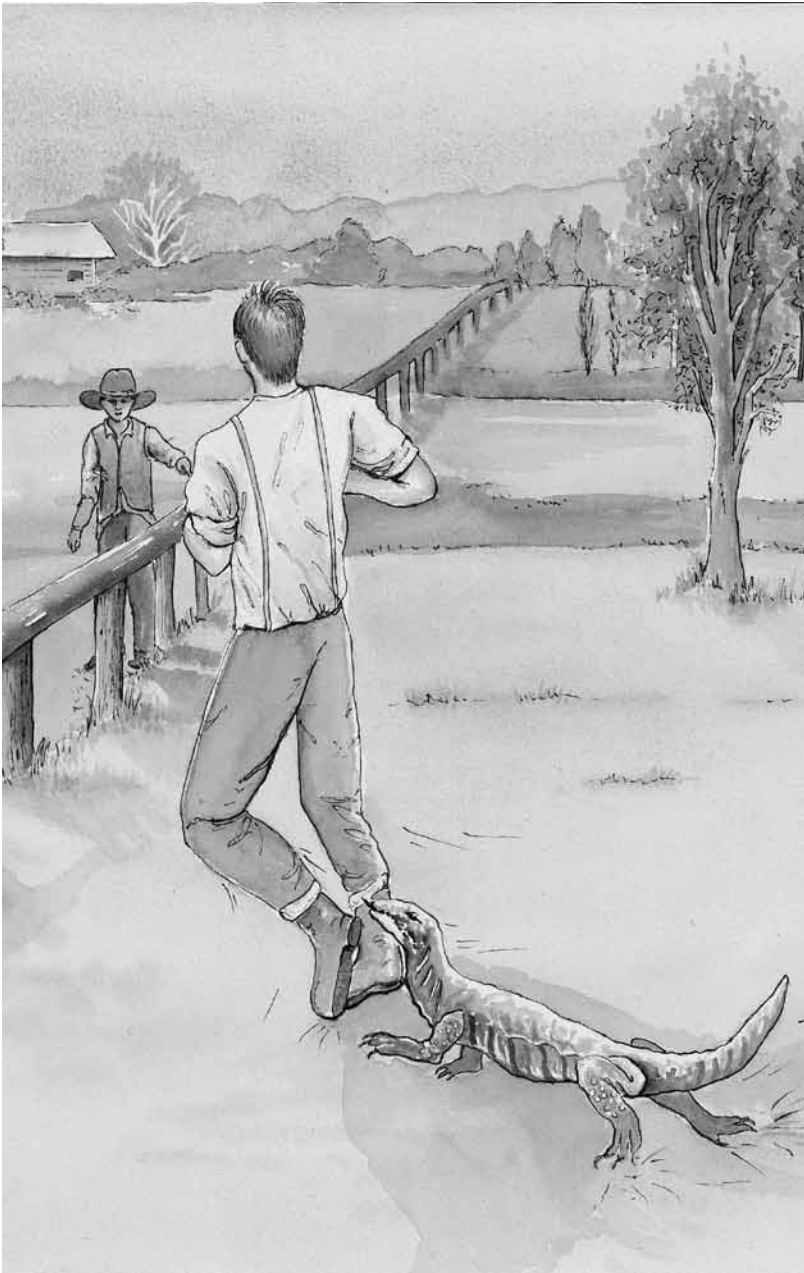
when the lightning struck the tree, he went so pale he almost glowed in the dark.

The other time Bill saw his dad afraid was when he trod on a bandy-bandy snake on his way to the outhouse. It was a wet night and when the black-and-white striped snake tangled in his legs, he thought his days were up. They never did count all the fang marks in his gumboots. Bill's dad bought a more powerful torch after that encounter.

Bill's dad was fascinated with the wildlife that came to visit from time to time. One day, when he was cutting down some tangled growth in order to enlarge the vegetable garden, he disturbed a racehorse goanna. As there were no big trees nearby for the reptile to shoot up, it leapt the fence and headed off across the open paddock. It was the largest and strangest goanna Bill had ever seen.

Bill later realised it was well named, as it was the fastest lizard he'd ever seen. It was easily seven feet (2 metres) long from its nose to the point of its tail. With an oversized head and a chest like a bulldog, it charged more than ran. It would take a very brave dog to give chase. Thankfully, Bill's dogs had their noses down and teeth bared, as they wisely backed away. Bill never really understood why his dad decided to give chase. He had nothing to use as a weapon, though he wouldn't really want to harm the monster. Still, he was determined to let the fleeing creature know that it was not welcome.

The goanna headed for a distant gum tree and Bill's dad was actually gaining on him. Terrified, the reptile screeched to a halt and turned to do battle. Bill's dad—who was in full flight—could only swerve to the right and leap to avoid the snapping jaws. Now it was the lizard giving chase and Bill's dad's turn to flee from the terrifying creature that pounded





bow-legged after him. His dad dodged and leaped back over the fence into the safety of the garden. Bill and his mum later suggested he should train for the Olympics.

After that, he always made sure the dogs were present when he worked in the garden or around tangled, weedy places. That decision probably saved his life on one occasion when he disturbed a huge red-bellied black snake from a pile of rubbish by the side of the house. Bill realised that only foolish people had no fears. Nature deserves a healthy respect, even from those who defy nature by claiming the moon is made of cheese and they have teeth in their stomach!



THE BATTLE OF THE BULL

There's a stray bull in our cow paddock!" Bill shouted to his dad as he trotted up on the old draught horse. "He's fighting our bull and disturbing the milking cows."

"What breed is he?" asked Bill's dad.

"I don't know—a bit of a mixture by the look of him. He's certainly not here to make friends and the cows are so upset, I can't round them up."

"I can't stop what I'm doing just now. Take the dogs back with you and see if you can get them to chase him back into the bush."

Bill called the dogs to heel, hoping they would keep out of range of the bull's nasty horns. He headed back down the hill to the flats where the small herd liked to graze, followed by his four unsuspecting dogs.

As soon as they arrived on the scene, the dogs sensed there was something strange going on. The jumpy and scattered



cows mooed for help urgently. Bill was amazed how one stray bull could cause so much havoc. The cows didn't know what to do to escape their intruder.

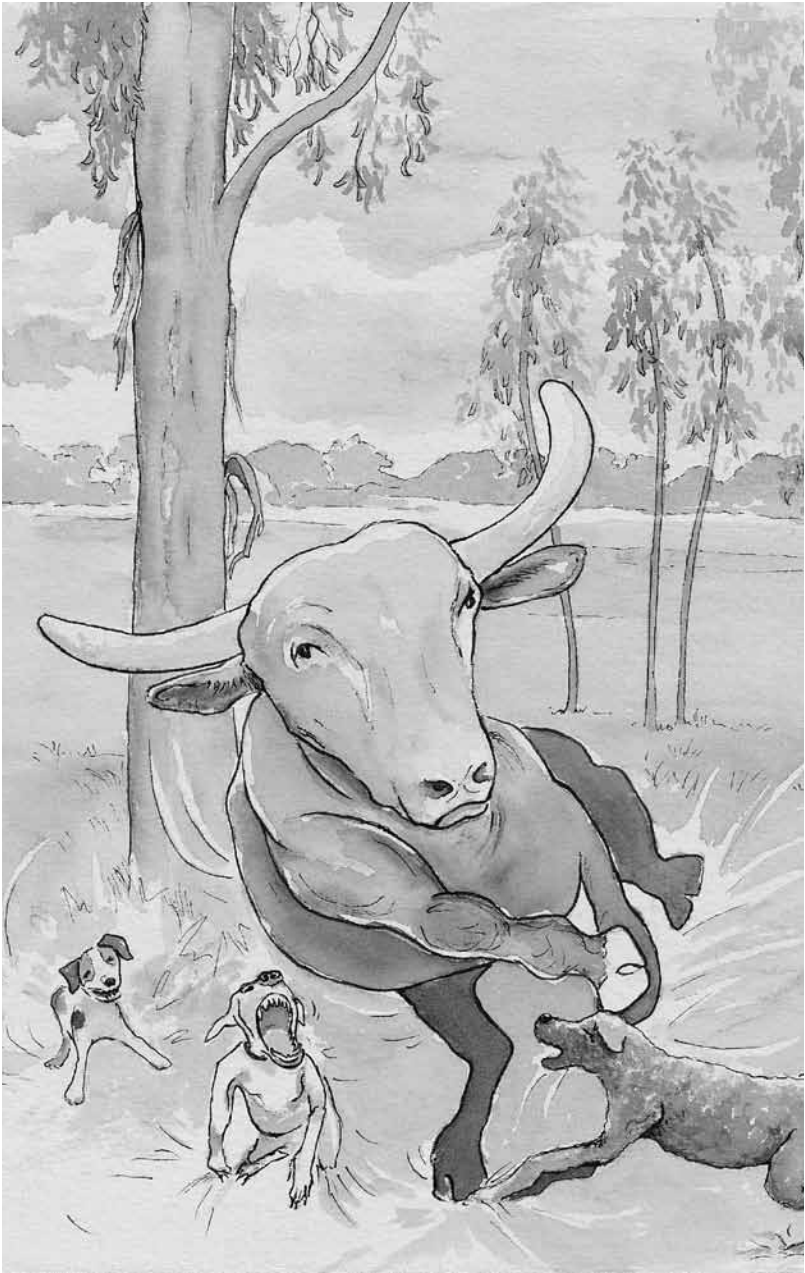
With a great deal of effort, Bill managed to isolate the unwanted visitor. He set the dogs onto him and small bundles of fury shot at the stamping brute. Bruce, the big black retriever, made a dive for the bull's back legs. The bull spun around, picked him up with his horns and tossed him high in the air. Bill cried out for his dog in helpless rage. Perhaps this battle was too big for his canine regiment.

The stampeding bull would have finished Bruce off if it hadn't been for the other three dogs. They attacked with such fury that the bull found himself on the defensive. Toss the fox terrier ran in and bit the bull on his nose when he charged at Trixy, who was trying to avoid his kicking back legs.

Then Judy pounced to bite into a back leg. The bull bellowed and struggled, besieged from front and back at the same time. Toss made a second leap for his nose as the bull was trying to get rid of Trixy and Judy, who were concentrating on his back legs.

Bill could do nothing to help and had to keep back as the dogs took control. This was a much bigger challenge than Bluey from the post office. Cows bunched together watching the fight, nostrils flaring at the bellowing, snarling and barking.

By now, Bruce had recovered and was ready for his counter attack. As soon as the bull was distracted with the smaller dogs' offensive from the front, Bruce dived for one of the bull's back legs. As he sunk his teeth into muscle and bone, the bull roared in pain and made a crazed leap to escape. Bruce let go and the hulking monster charged off into the bush, four yelping, snarling dogs in gritty pursuit. After a





few minutes, the herd calmed down enough for Bill to round them up and herd them toward the bails.

That night as Bill and his parents sat at the meal table listening to the war news on the radio, Bill's dad remarked how amazing it was that a few greedy people could disturb the whole world.

"They're just like the stray bull," Bill said. "Everything was quiet and peaceful until he came along. I was really afraid he was going to kill Bruce."

"Yes!" added Bill's mum. "There's often similarities between human and animal behaviour. Bullies cause untold trouble when they try to take control."

"Some people could do with our pack of dogs to scare them off!" Bill added, as he snuck an extra treat for Bruce and his little regiment. He felt they deserved it after winning the heroic "Battle of The Bull" at great risk to their own lives.



BILL'S MUM AND THE SPIDER

Bill's mum had grown up in the city so snakes, cockroaches, rats, lizards and cupboards infested with ants or weevils took some getting used to. To live in this old timber-slab cottage with no electricity, no running water, a rickety old outhouse, rusty water tanks and for a laundry, a small open shed with a wood-fired copper and hand ringer, challenged her spirit of adventure to the extreme.

Bill never heard her complain, even when she had a quiet cry as she battled with food that went rotten or weevils taking over the flour bin. She always seemed on top of the situation. But there was a day when Bill saw his mum really distressed.

She had gone out to the water tank to fill up a jug of water when a big, black spider sprang from nowhere and bit her hand. She flicked the spider away and let out a yell of fear and anger.

Bill raced to the charcoal pits where his dad was working,



crying out, “Dad, come quick!” Bill’s dad responded immediately to the frantic call. Bill was terrified his mum might die.

It wasn’t long before her hand swelled and turned a menacing dark red. She fought back tears and her face turned clammy and pale with the pain. No-one knew what to do—they had no transport and the bus didn’t return to Forster until late in the evening, and there was no telephone. She was unable to continue with her housework and just wanted to lay on her bed.

As the afternoon wore on, she started to perspire more, lying feverish and moaning. Bill and his dad were frantic with worry when a bushman rode in for a visit. He said he wanted to replenish his water bag but he really wanted to have a stickybeak.* He said he was on his way to buy some cattle and wouldn’t stay long.

“Do you know anything about spider bites?” Bill’s dad urgently asked the stranger. “My wife is in a lot of pain and has a fever.”

“What kind of spider was it?” the stockman asked.

“We don’t know,” Bill’s dad replied.

“Well, it doesn’t matter too much. There isn’t much we can do about it. From my experience with poisonous spiders, there’s a pretty good chance of survival if the victim is still alive after sunset!”

Bill’s dad wasn’t comforted by the stockman’s words of wisdom but thanked him all the same. He frowned as he watched him ride off down the paddock and, for the first time, they all felt the seriousness of isolation. However, they knew they were not completely alone. They could pray together for Bill’s mum.

“It’s a good thing God can see everything,” said Bill.





“Yes!” agreed his dad. “This is one time when everything depends on Him.”

That evening, the swelling went down and the pain eased so that Bill’s mum could move her hand and relax. Bill and his dad stopped pacing and straining to think of spider bite remedies. They all thanked God for being there and hearing them when they had been so desperate and alone.

Bill knew his mum was glad when their three years of rough country living came to an end. A more civilised home back in Forster gave her a less challenging life. She would never take running water, a telephone and closer neighbours for granted again.



RODEO DARING

One day a travelling rodeo came to a nearby town. Bill pestered his dad to take him along as there would be buck jumping, roping, donkey catching, bullock riding, whip cracking and clowns. This was his favourite kind of entertainment.

The event was held in a big tent with tiers of seats from ground level up to the top where the people were nearly touching the roof of the tent. In the centre was a ring made of tight ropes about 10 feet (3 metres) high. At the end there was a gate where the animals came and went. The men involved in the action could squeeze between the ropes.

The show started with a demonstration of whip cracking. Bill enjoyed this, as he was just learning how to crack his stock whip. An exhibition of buck jumping by one of the rodeo team followed. The rider managed to stay on for the required 10 seconds before being rescued by some of his mates.

After some clowns had done their best to make everyone



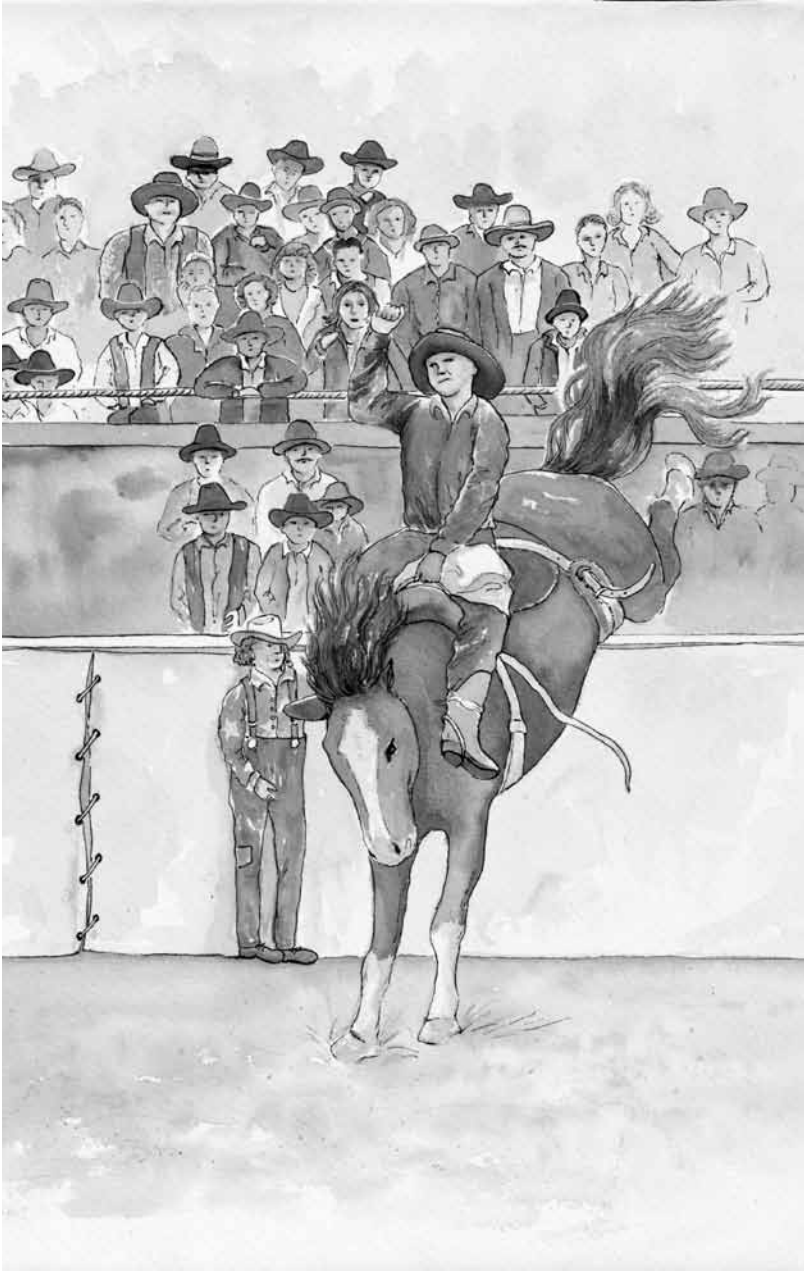
laugh, they brought in a donkey. The ringmaster offered five pounds if a boy from the audience could tie a rope around the donkey's neck and lead him around the ring. About 30 boys climbed into the ring, including Bill. Every time they got near, the animal's ears went back and he charged with his teeth bared. When anyone got too close to his rear end, he would kick out dangerously at the boys. It was entertaining for the onlookers but not as much fun for the boys. They decided to rush him as a group but he was too cunning for that. He just went into a corner and aimed his rear end at the onslaught. After a few more minutes, the ringmaster cracked his whip and the "fun" was over.

Things turned nasty when a bull rider was thrown against the ropes. The crowd watched quietly as he was carried out. Another cowboy had more success as he rode a buck jumper to a standstill. Bill thought he had never seen a more skilful horseman and they all cheered his performance.

After another bull ride, they had another performance by some clowns, then came the feature of the night. A wild horse named "Lightning" that had never been ridden for longer than 10 seconds stormed into the ring. A professional rough rider would attempt to be the first to stay on him for more than the 10 seconds required.

The audience was hushed as they led the big black horse around the ring. He was snorting and pounding the ground. He sure looked like a wild animal and Bill shuddered as he watched the angry actions of the horse. He noted the muscles and the wide chest, the strong legs and stamping hooves. This was going to be one mighty contest between man and beast.

The attendants put a bag over the horse's head while they saddled him up. It took four men to hold the horse steady while the cowboy leapt into the saddle. The horse exploded





into a bucking, kicking, grunting ball of fury. After eight seconds, the rider was thrown into the ropes and was quickly rescued before the deadly pounding hooves could trample him. It took a few minutes before the horse calmed enough for the cowboys to lead him out.

Then came some more tricks by stock whip handlers, a poem about the outback by a cowgirl, some performing dogs and a lady who rode a horse bareback. She also performed tricks and made Bill feel like he didn't know much about horseriding.

Toward the end of the program, the handlers led a piebald horse into the ring and invited anyone in the audience to try out as a "rough rider." The handlers offered 20 pounds to any rider who could stay on the horse for 10 seconds. There was quite a stir as some lads in the crowd, who had a high opinion of their riding ability, considered the challenge. The piebald stood in the middle of the ring as quiet as a lamb. He looked like a pushover—just like any farm horse from around the district.

A boy of about 18 stood up to accept the challenge and everyone cheered to encourage the local boy. He was a stranger to Bill but there seemed to be a lot of people who knew him. When he entered the ring, the ringmaster asked if he had much experience with buck jumpers. He admitted he had only ridden a few steers and a few young horses when they were being broken in.

The ringmaster then asked why he wanted to test his skills on the piebald horse. He said his friends had dared him to have a go. Bill thought this was a stupid reason to take such a risk. Why do dangerous things just because some so-called friends dared you?

Bill remembered when he was mocked for refusing to take

a dare to climb a giant old pine tree. Later the tree fell over in a strong wind because its centre was rotten. Another time he was dared to run through the paddock of a cranky bull. Again he refused and a few days later the bull gored a man who was picking blackberries. Bill had learned not to take on dares.

It was finally time for the local rider to have a go on the piebald horse, named "Mandrake" because he was full of tricks. They saddled up Mandrake and gave the volunteer a leg up. The docile hack transformed into a whirlwind of flying hooves, twisting, turning, rearing, bucking and pounding down hard on all four hooves.

The rider stayed on for six seconds until he was flung in the air. He landed with a sickening crunch and the handlers quickly moved the horse away. The boy lay very still and a nurse from the crowd scrambled through the ropes, rushing to his side. The audience sat in silence as the rodeo crew gathered around the injured rider and the nurse quickly called for an ambulance.

After the ambulance departed, the show was over and everyone quietly filed out. The ones who had dared their mate to have a go were the first to leave the scene. Bill and his dad agreed that taking on dares was a dangerous game. Life can be risky enough without taking risks just to entertain friends. A few days later, Bill heard that the rider had received some serious injuries but was recovering. Bill doubted if he would ever take on another dare.



DAIRY FARM FEAST

Hang onto his tail while I get a grip on his head,” Jack called to Bill. “He sure is a stubborn poddy calf. We’ll have to call him ‘Pharaoh.’”

The shiny black bull calf had just been taken away from his mother so she could rejoin the herd. Bill and Jack were trying to direct him into the calf pen, where the calf would have to learn to drink out of a bucket.

Bill was visiting a family who ran a dairy farm on the banks of the Manning River. He loved spending time there with the four boys and three girls in the family. There was always a lot going on and they knew how to make work fun. Bill never wanted to leave and even enjoyed getting up early.

“Come on, Bill! It’s time to go and get the cows in for milking,” whispered Jack, who was always up before him. “We’d better hurry as we’re late. It’s five o’clock already.”

“Brrr! It’s cold,” Bill shivered. “There must be a frost out there.”

“Not to worry,” encouraged Jack. “There are plenty of warm

clothes you can borrow. You can wear my gumboots with these thick socks."

"What'll you wear on your feet?"

"Don't worry about me, mate," Jack grinned. "I'm used to this farm life. We have to be tough to survive."

The boys crept out of the house and into the cold morning air. The frost lay heavy on the ground, causing them to pull down their hats and button up their coats.

"Let's run," suggested Jack. "It'll help us warm up and make up for lost time."

"How will we see the cows in the dark? This lantern's not very bright."

"You'll see them by their breath," laughed Jack. "They look like a herd of dragons with the steam coming out of their mouths."

Sure enough, Bill soon found himself in the midst of a herd of cows. They were sitting and standing around, chewing their cud like a bunch of teenagers chilling out and chewing gum. Steam came from their bodies as well as their mouths.

Jack soon got the herd moving, with the help of his kelpie dog and a few prods from his stick, and the cows reluctantly headed for the milking shed. Jack stood in a warm patch that a helpful cow had left behind.

"Jack, watch where you're standing," exclaimed Bill. Jack just wriggled his feet, laughing.

"How can you stand in that?" Bill's eyes were wide at the thought that he had stood in a cowpat on purpose.

"This is how I keep my feet warm. It is only cow dung, it washes off."

Bill was even more thankful for the thick socks.

"Get up, you lazy four-legged milk bars," Bill shouted as he and Jack herded the 200 dawdling cows into the stockyard.



As they were closing the gate, the diesel motor that powered the milking machinery started up. Jack's older brothers were on the job and Bill was amazed by how everything went like clockwork in the milking shed.

"There they go," sighed Jack as he closed the yard gate on the last cow. "They can spend the rest of the day wandering around eating grass and doing their own thing while we have to work."

"How come you have to work in the school holidays?" Bill asked. "Do you ever go fishing or riding your bike?"

"Ha!" retorted Jack. "Not much time for play on a dairy farm. Everyone has jobs and it's corn-picking time, so even you will find out the meaning of real work."

Bill thought corn picking sounded more like fun than work.

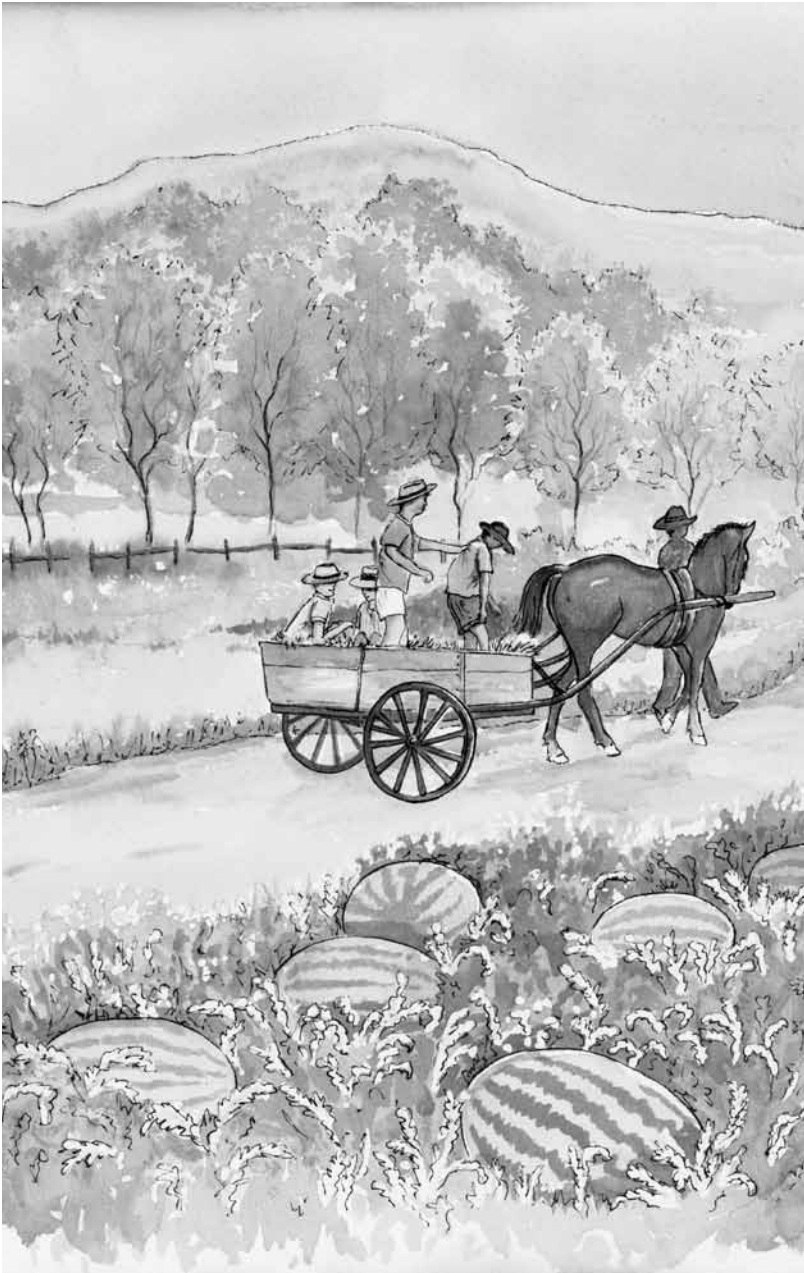
"After breakfast, we'll catch the draught horse, harness him to the cart and ride out to the corn patch," Jack added.

Everyone was on time for the home-cooked breakfast that farms are famous for. There seemed to be plenty of everything on the huge table, which was loaded with home-grown goodies.

"Phew! That was some breakfast," exclaimed Bill as he rode in the cart to the cornfield. "Your mum's a great cook, Jack. With your vegie garden and the dairy produce, you live quite well."

"Yes, living off the land can be better than living in the city, especially when times are tough and food is hard to come by," Jack said wisely. They had all heard that food was being rationed due to the war and the shortage of supplies.

The cart stopped at the cornfield and it was time to work. Once through the gate, the draught horse sped up, his face forward as he headed eagerly down the rows of corn stalks.





He was drooling at the sight of juicy, green leaves. It was Jack's job to lead the horse along the rows while the pickers tossed the cobs into the cart. At the same time, the big horse made sure he got his fair share of the stalks.

Bill discovered that picking corn wasn't such a great game for an amateur like himself. It wasn't long before his hands began to blister, and his arms and back started to ache as muscles woke up. As the sun rose higher, the workers began to perspire. There were more frequent stops for water and hints that it was time for a rest.

It was music to Bill's ears, blistered hands and aching muscles when Jack's dad suggested it was time for a break. "How about checking the garden to see if there's a ripe watermelon waiting to be eaten?" he asked. "Athol, you take Bill with you and see if you can find a nice big melon."

It was only a short walk back along the track to the garden where the family grew all their vegetables. Right in the middle of the patch was the biggest watermelon Bill had ever seen. The two boys soon rolled it out onto the track. Too heavy for them to carry, they rolled it all the way back to the cornfield.

The farmer cut into the melon and it cracked open, revealing rich red juicy flesh. Bill felt like the draught horse drooling over the corn as he watched the slices being cut. They were cut thick and round like wheels, then cut in half again. However, two slices were left whole. Bill reached over and took a full-circle slice. He borrowed the knife and got busy devouring the delicious melon.

"I think one half will do me," said Jack with a grin and a knowing look at Athol. "I want to leave some room for lunch."

Soon they were all hard at work again—except for Bill, who was struggling to finish the amount he had taken. He

didn't realise how much he had stuffed himself until he tried to walk.

"I think I might rest here in the shade of this oak tree for a few minutes," Bill moaned as he waddled to the shadows. He didn't want to admit he had overeaten and was feeling most uncomfortable.

"Not a problem, Bill," called the others. "You relax, we'll soon have this section picked. Then we can all go home for a good cooked dinner."

Bill moaned again at the thought of more food. They were all amused by Bill's discomfort and knew he would be in trouble when he saw the delicious lunch that would be waiting for them.

By midday, there was still a large section of the cornfield to be picked but the cart was full. They decided to head back to the barn, where the corn would be stored. It would be left to dry, ready for the husking process. The corn kernels would be fed to the hens, as well as the cows and horses, when grass was in short supply.

As they were removing the harness from the draught horse, the dinner bell rang. The midday meal was ready, which caused a flurry of pushing and shoving around the washbasin.

"What's the big hurry?" Bill wanted to know.

"We're hungry," they cried. "Wait to see the feast Mum has cooked for us."

But Bill was anything but hungry. His stomach was still uncomfortably full and he doubted he could add to his overloaded stomach, even if he wanted to.

"Come on, you hungry bunch of hardworking people," Jack's mum called as they marched into the big dinning room. "This should satisfy your appetite and replace all that energy you've used up in the cornfield."



Bill couldn't believe his eyes as he looked over the table. There was a huge bowl of corn cobs smothered in home-churned butter, another bowl of fresh green beans, boiled potatoes sprinkled with parsley, mountains of creamy mashed pumpkin, peas cooked in mint and—to top it all off—an exotic salad. Even better than all the fresh food from their garden was the aroma of freshly baked warm bread, thickly sliced and golden.

"Come on, Bill," teased young Peter. "If you don't get a move on, there'll be nothing left."

The family laughed at Bill's discomfort as he gazed longingly at the delicious meal. His tastebuds were working overtime but his stomach was screaming, "No room!"

"Come on, Bill. What's the matter with you?" Jack stirred.

"It looks great but I'm not hungry," confessed Bill. "Maybe I'll just try a small cob of corn."

The trouble was, nothing was small at this feast. Bill's giant corncob kept him busy until everyone had left the table, ready to get on with the job of husking the cobs picked a few days before.

"You can leave what you can't finish, Bill," Jack's mum assured him. "It isn't good to overeat. Have a rest so you'll be ready for the evening meal."

Bill learned a good lesson that day. We always suffer when our eyes are bigger than our stomachs. Just in case he hadn't quite learned his lesson, tea that night was pumpkin soup—Bill's least favourite food—and it took a while before Bill could get excited about another slice of watermelon.



TAMING THE TOWN BULLY

Bill and his mates sat on stools in their favourite milk bar, eating their usual—ice-cream floating in chocolate sauce. When one of the local boys walked over to their alcove, they stopped eating and stared. He had a black eye and a swollen nose.

“Gilbert! You look like you’ve been in a fight,” Bill cried.

“Sure have,” admitted Gilbert. “That kid Kenny caught me while I was picking blackberries behind the quarry. His two mates stood by, grinning, while he challenged me to a fight.”

“You’re lucky you got off as lightly as you did,” said Tom, shaking his head. “He’s a right pest, he is. He takes boxing lessons and because he’s big and tough, he thinks he can take on everyone.”

“Yeah, every time he sees me he shouts his mouth off, wanting a fight,” added Bill.

“Ha!” laughed Rex. “He’ll have to outrun your horse before



he gives you a black eye. You have an unfair advantage.”

“And I plan to keep it that way,” said Bill.

The boys laughed at the idea of the town bully chasing Bill on his horse. As they finished their ice-creams, they became more serious. There had to be a way to stop Kenny attacking every boy in town.

Kenny went to a different school than Bill and his friends. His father found it hard to keep any job he was lucky enough to find, and often made money by fishing from the rocks at Bennetts Head. One of Kenny’s uncles was an ex-boxer from a boxing troupe that travelled around the country shows.

“Rex, didn’t your dad do some boxing in his early days?” asked Ron.

“Yeah, in the army,” said Rex, twirling his spoon in his empty bowl thoughtfully.

“Do you think he could give us some lessons?” Tom asked, leaning forward. “We might not become champions but it could help us defend ourselves if we get caught like Gilbert did.”

“I could ask him. We do have a big backyard and there’s plenty of room for a boxing ring,” mused Rex. “It could be fun!”

The boys excitedly formed an amateur boxing club right there and then. They would buy their own gloves and Rex’s dad would be their coach.

A week went by before a very-excited Rex let them know he and his dad had rigged up a rough boxing ring in their backyard. His dad was willing to give them some boxing lessons. It was agreed: for two afternoons after school they would meet at Rex’s place for a session of sparring and practice, until Rex’s dad arrived home from work so the lessons could begin.

Over the weeks, the five boys began to develop their own styles as they learned how to box. The whole idea was to learn a defensive style but, at the same time, they were taught how to discourage an aggressor. Three of the boys were content to develop a defensive style but Gilbert and Bill were more inclined to box aggressively. This led to some lively contests, which tended to result in more than hurt feelings.

Rex's dad was pleased with his pupils' progress. "You boys are doing very well and can now hold your own with most boys your age. We need to bring in some lads who fancy themselves good boxers and see how you handle some stronger competition," he suggested.

The boys looked at each other nervously, wondering where he would find contenders.

"I know a chap over at Tuncurry who trains a few boys. I'm sure he would jump at the chance to bring his lads over for a tournament," their instructor enthused.

So the boys nervously agreed to a Sunday afternoon competition, hoping they wouldn't all end up in hospital. They didn't dare tell their parents and hoped there wouldn't be any evidence to give their amateur game away.

When the day arrived, Bill and his mates were surprised to discover that they knew most of the boys present. They realised the others were just as nervous as they were. Their instructors insisted there was not to be any real fighting. It was a boxing tournament to help sharpen their skills and if anyone lost his cool, the match would be called off. There would be three-minute rounds with one-minute breaks. It was OK if someone wanted to call it off, if he felt he was unfairly matched.

"Just remember," emphasised the visiting instructor, "we're all here to have some fun and learn, not to belt the daylights out of each other."



And so the fun began. It soon became obvious they were evenly matched. It was equal hit for hit and although there were a few bruises and two blood noses, the boys enjoyed their first tournament.

The next day, at their favourite milk bar, the boys enjoyed an animated re-run of their adventure and discussed new tricks they'd learned.

"That red-headed guy had a dangerous left hook," said Bill. "I'm glad we were only sparring. I would hate to meet him when he was angry."

"Yes," laughed Tom, "but you held your own and managed to block his attempts to break your guard."

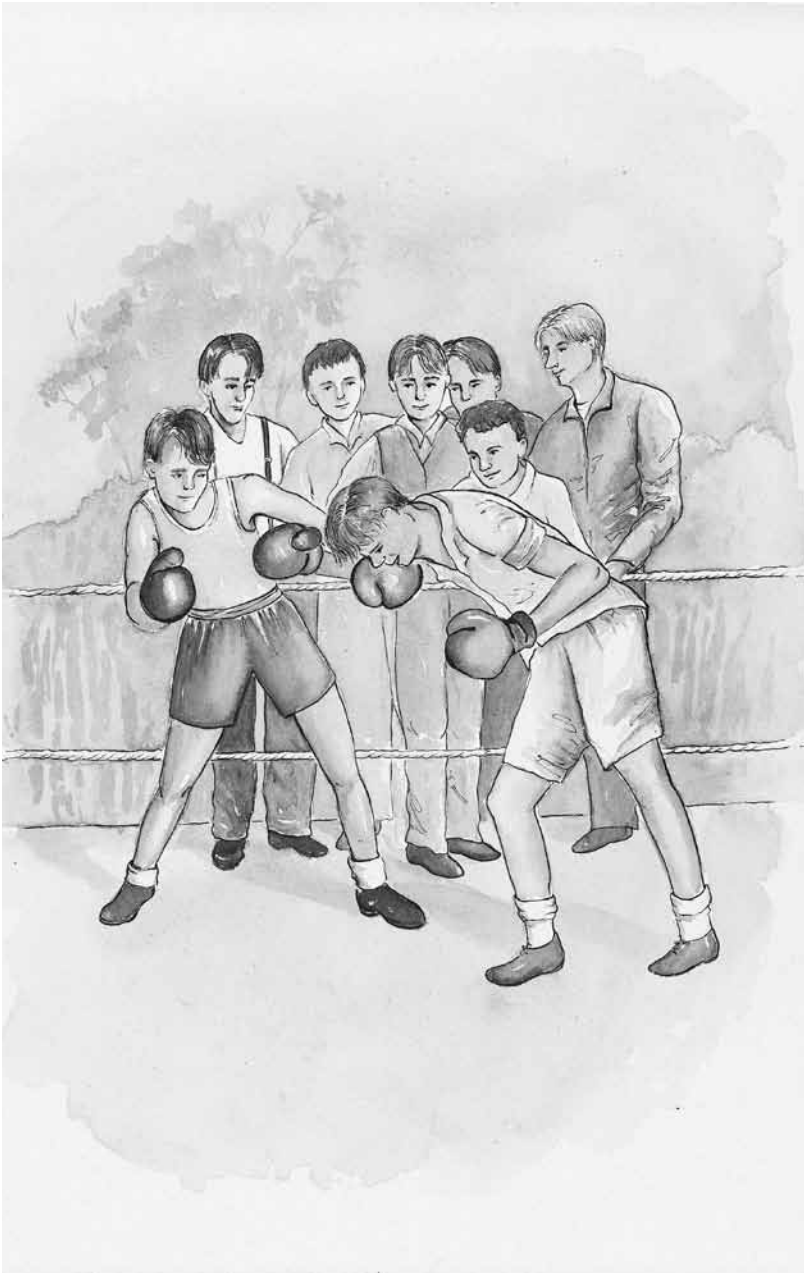
"And how about Gilbert?" grinned Rex. "He was more than a match for that tall blond bloke who looked like he'd been boxing for years."

"Yeah, Gilbert, you surprised them with the way you handled yourself," encouraged Ron. "I reckon you've got the makings of a real boxer."

"Well," sighed Gilbert, "all I want is to be able to defend myself when I meet up with some guy wanting to push me around."

The news spread about Bill and his mates' performance against the guys from across the water. A week later, three more boys turned up to see if they could join the club. The afternoon sessions were becoming quite an event, with an audience watching the boys as they boxed in the ring and during training with bags of sawdust, skipping and shadow boxing.

One day, three unexpected heads appeared over the fence to see what was happening. Ron immediately called out for them to come in and watch. The visitors were a bit hesitant but they slipped inside the yard and found a quiet corner to watch the action.





"Hey Bill," whispered Tom. "Look who's turned up? Fancy Kenny and his shadows coming to give us the once over."

"A real surprise," said Bill quietly. "I'll bet they want to see how we handle ourselves. It may make them all the more keen to take us on when we meet them on the street."

"Maybe we should fight them here, where we have a controlled set-up," suggested Tom. "If we can show them we're not just a bunch of mugs playing games, they might leave us alone."

"You mean challenge them to a contest here and now?" stammered Bill.

"Why not?" Tom asked. "This is what it's about, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Bill agreed. "Let's get Ron to see if they're up for it."

Unease spread through the boxing troupe as the town bully and his mates leaned against the fence and watched them perform, grinning. Ron approached to suggest the three boys might like to have a few rounds with their choice of club members.

"I'll fight that kid over there," declared one of Kenny's mates. "He's about my size."

Tom was shocked when the boy pointed in his direction. But what could he do? The whole exercise was a farce if the boys were too scared to take them on.

"OK!" said Tom. "But remember we are boxing, not fighting."

The two boys pulled on their boxing gloves and Ron climbed into the ring to referee.

Bill sat on a stool, clutching the bell and his watch to serve as timekeeper.

"You know the rules, when I say break, you jump apart and carry on until the bell rings," Ron said in his most

official voice. "Any foul punches and you're disqualified—the opponent wins."

As soon as the bell rang, the challenger rushed at Tom like a wild bull. He obviously wanted to do damage. However, Tom had been learning. He dodged the rush and the wild swing. It was clear to all present that these boys knew how to fight but not how to box. As the boys dodged around, Tom managed to avoid another of his opponent's swings. He soon worked out his "style" and managed to get in a couple of solid hits. This only made the boy leap more wildly. The match became fast and heated.

Whack! The challenger hit Tom below the belt. Tom doubled over in agony and dropped his guard. The opponent rushed forward with eyes narrowed, wild fists flailing. Ron charged in to stop the fight.

"That was a dirty punch," declared Ron. "You're disqualified. You lose and . . ."—his voice grew louder—"you're banned from this ring."

The boy slunk over to his mates, who smiled crooked smiles and slapped him on the back. Now it was Kenny's turn to make a challenge. Everyone expected him to pick on Gilbert but he pointed to Bill.

"I want to do a few rounds with that horse-riding guy who always gallops off whenever I challenge him to a fight," snarled Kenny. "He has nowhere to go in the ring, so let's see how well he handles himself."

Kenny was the same height as Bill but more solid and much more experienced in fighting. After weeks of training, this was Bill's biggest test of skills in the ring. Besides, Kenny was the real reason they were all taking lessons from Rex's dad. Bill knew Tom was right—it was better to face him here than on the street or on a bush track.



“OK, Kenny, let’s have a few rounds but remember that I’m no fighter, only an amateur boxer,” stammered Bill, who was wishing he was a long way away. Ron went through the rules again and warned that he would stop the match if either opponent lost their temper or wanted to “throw in the towel.”

As soon as they had tapped gloves, they danced around sizing each other up. They traded a few punches until Kenny got in a straight hit to Bill’s nose, causing Bill to lose balance.

As soon as Bill got back onto his feet, Kenny rushed, thinking he would be groggy. Bill was expecting him and managed to duck and jump aside, catching Kenny by surprise. When he turned, his guard was down. Bill used his left hook to throw a solid punch to Kenny’s jaw. Though he stumbled, Kenny was not hurt enough to put him on the ground. Before they could continue, the bell sounded the end of the first round.

Instead of getting angry, Kenny gave Bill a big grin and declared, “You’re a surprise package, mate. I thought you’d be a pushover but we’re quite evenly matched.”

The next two rounds went without incident, each boy giving as good as he got, until the bell ended the last round. They shook hands and went over to the garden tap for a drink.

“You guys have got a good set-up here,” admitted Kenny “How long have you been doing this?”

“Oh, the club’s been going for about two months now,” Bill said, feeling his nose and finding it bigger than normal. Before he knew what he was saying, Bill added, “Why don’t you and your mates join our club?”

“You think they’d welcome us?” Kenny asked in amazement. “We’ve been a bit rough on some of your mates, and chased some of you when you wouldn’t stop and fight. You only

escaped because you were on horseback.”

“We won’t hold any grudges,” encouraged Bill.

The others also agreed Kenny and his mates could join their boxing club. Ron thought it was better to have them fighting with them than against them. The plan worked well and, over the weeks and months, they became good friends. They never did find the need to tell Kenny he had inspired them to set the club up in the first place. When they set up their boxing training to learn to defend themselves, they never imagined how it would solve the problem. They gained a friend and the town lost a bully.



BILL GOES TO SEA

Wallis Lake meets the ocean between Forster and Tuncurry, with its deepest channel on the Tuncurry side, where the wharves are. Here, the fishing boats moored and the fish market busily dealt with the day's catch. Fishing trawlers stayed out for days at a time, until they had their refrigerators full of prawns or fish. It was always a great sight as the boats headed out, across the bar and through the waves, on their way to challenge the ocean.

Bill often sat on the rocks of the breakwater that protected the main swimming beach on the Forster side of the channel. It fascinated him to watch the boats plough their way through the swell before disappearing in the distance. He decided they were brave men and imagined the unexpected storms, freezing winds and pelting rain they would have to deal with.

One day while he was sitting in the milk bar enjoying his special dish of ice-cream floating in chocolate sauce, Bill asked his mate Mike, whose dad was a fisherman, if he ever went out on his dad's boat.

"What is it like to spend days out at sea on a fishing boat?" he asked.

"It isn't much fun, really. It's very hard work and everyone is expected to do their share. Once the actual fishing starts, it's nonstop action. The boat is rocking from side to side and everyone is working like crazy on a wet, slippery deck. You have to wear heavy wet-weather gear and work under the glare of spotlights. It isn't my idea of fun."

"Do they ever go out for a day trip, or are they always out for three or four days?"

"Sometimes they'll take a group of fishermen out for a day. When they go out prawning, if there are plenty about, they'll stay out for just a day," Mike said.

"I'd like to go out for a day trip some time," Bill suggested. "It must be great to go out on the ocean and look back at the land. You would feel the isolation of being a long way from shore, with only water as far as you can see."

"OK! I'll talk to Dad and ask him if he would take us out next time he plans to do a day's fishing or prawning."

Missing a day of school was the least of Bill's worries. The challenge was persuading his parents but that didn't prove too difficult when they saw the excursion as part of his education.

After a few weeks, he got word to prepare for a day out on the ocean. When the day arrived, it was perfect. The sky was clear, there was a gentle breeze and the sea looked as quiet as a backyard swimming pool.

Bill and Mike had to be at the wharf by 4 o'clock in the morning—a real challenge for Bill. However, he made it on time and the two boys were soon perched in the bow of the trawler, watching the town lights disappear as they headed out to sea.

The boys had no problem with the strong swell while the



trawler was heading into the waves. A few miles out to sea, however, the trawler turned side on to the waves as it headed along the coast. Now everything rolled from side to side, including the two passengers, just as Mike had warned Bill in the cafe. And there was worse to come.

About mid-morning, the skipper signalled that they were over the fishing grounds. The trawler slowed while the crew lowered the dredge boards that would stir up the prawns to then be caught in the nets. At first, it was fun for the boys to watch all the activity. But as they slowly trawled along scooping up the prawns, the rolling ship caused the boys to feel strangely uncomfortable. They started to yawn and their mouths were filling with saliva.

By lunchtime, the sun was powerful and they were too thirsty, too hot and very hungry. There wasn't room for them in the wheelhouse so they had to stay out on the open deck. The boys sat on a life raft and devoured their lunch but Bill wasn't enjoying himself as much as he expected. He was constantly rolled from side to side and as the boys tried to find a comfortable place to sit, there was no breeze and no escaping the relentless sun.. Bill felt more like lying down as he was feeling drowsy, with a strange feeling in his stomach and a dizzy head.

Suddenly, the skipper gave word to pull in the nets and there was a flurry of activity. Up came the nets and tonnes of prawns poured into the hold. It distracted the boys from their woes as they watched the crew skilfully controlling the equipment. When the skipper turned the trawler around as if to head for home, Bill sighed with relief but to his horror, they dropped the dredging boards for another catch.

"Wow!" he exclaimed to Mike. "I think I'm going to lose my lunch."





“Me, too,” said Mike. “This is going to be a tough afternoon. It looks like the swell is building and getting rougher, so we’ll be rocking and rolling all the way home.”

It wasn’t long after that Bill lost his lunch. Next, he lost his breakfast and after that, he lost everything he ate the day before. He turned a pale green colour and was perspiring from the effort. All he wanted to do was lie down and sleep and though the sloping deck was wet and hard, Bill was too exhausted to notice. The boys fell asleep with their hats over their eyes and their arms around the bottom wire of the guard railing. About an hour later, they awoke to a noisy crew hoisting bulging nets over the stern of the heaving trawler.

Bill started with shock to find his arm hanging over the side of the trawler. When the boat rose with the swell, his arm was a well above the water but when the boat plunged into the swell, his arm almost touched the water. Bill could see a large shark eyeing him as it circled the boat, looking for tidbits from the nets.

Bill had never had eye contact with a shark before and he yanked his arm out of the predator’s reach. The boys were relieved when the skipper finally called out, “Let’s head for home, boys. We’ve had a good day and all is well.”

Bill wasn’t sure that all was well but he sure was looking forward to getting as far away from the shark as possible. He wanted the solid ground of home and was as hungry as a hunter after his clean out.

“I’ve sure been cured from wanting to go to sea,” he admitted to Mike. “I’m not cut out for a life on the waves.”

“Nor me,” Mike admitted. “I forget how sick I feel at sea and it makes me long for dry land. I’m glad Dad doesn’t insist I follow him in his career. My younger brother is keen, so he’s welcome to it.”

As Bill rode home on his bicycle that evening, he wondered how he would explain his day to his parents. What he'd imagined as an exciting adventure at sea had turned out to be the most miserable experience. At home, his parents were keen to hear how the ocean education went.

"Mike warned me that I may not enjoy the experience but he didn't mention the possibility of sea-sickness. It was hot, rough, smelly and uncomfortable but at least I have been and done it. I am now satisfied that a life on the ocean is not for me." Bill sighed as he tucked into some hot tomato soup and toast.

"Not everyone gets seasick. Maybe you wouldn't have gone if he had painted too detailed a picture," suggested his mum. "When you stop and think about it, you have learned a lot from this.. Not everything is as glamorous or exciting as we imagine from a distance."

That night, the room seemed to be moving from side to side as Bill lay in his warm bed, thinking about the day's misadventure in the trawler. It was an outing he would never forget—and never repeat. His respect for fishermen had definitely grown, along with his expanding education.



THE WORST SKIPPER

Before the bridge was built between Tuncurry and Forster, the only way across the wide channel was by punt. The correct term is “vehicular ferry” but the locals knew the flat barge as “the punt.” It had two gates at each end and fence-like wooden railings along the sides. The punt took cars and trucks, as well as foot passengers. It was propelled by a powerful smaller boat, attached to the punt by strong ropes and kept away from the punt by large truck tyres. On a pleasant day it was an enjoyable one-hour trip, barring mishaps.

There were always plenty of pelicans and seagulls flying around or perching on the numerous sandbars scattered about the channel. Pilots had to be on the alert for the hazardous sandbars. Along with his deckhand, the pilot was constantly watching for shifting sand. It was even more of a danger at night, when the town lights and moonlight reflected on the water.

The most difficult time was at low tide. Sometimes the punt would have to remain at the wharf until there was enough

water to cross safely. It was not unusual for the punt to get stuck but usually, with some clever manoeuvring, the pilot could reverse off the sandbar and find a way into deeper water.

Ted, the boat's skipper, decided to train his son, Larry, as an assistant. This way if he was ever sick or wanted a holiday, Larry could take over as skipper. The old man was getting on in years, so the town council agreed.

Larry had just left school and was doing odd jobs around town to earn a living while he made up his mind about what he wanted to do with his life. He was well known in town for two things—his recklessness and his keen interest in girls. He had joined the Life Saving Club mostly to parade up and down the beach in his club cap and flirt with the girls.

Larry kept an eye on the tourists during the summer and kept them well sprayed with suntan lotion but no-one could remember seeing Larry getting wet or joining in the competitions. His most strenuous activity was turning up at parties and he had a way of livening up any occasion that needed extra sparkle.

Bill and his mates didn't hang out with Larry, who was older, more fluent with swear words and loudly dominated every conversation. The local girls kept out of his way, even though he would hang around them at the beach and show off, pretending to be what he wasn't.

One day when there was a shark alarm, the boys were amused by Larry's performance. "Look at Larry," Tom laughed. "He's busy saving girls who don't need saving." Larry was grabbing their hands and pulling them out of the water, even though they were doing quite well on their own.

When the "all clear" signal had been called, Larry ran up and down inviting the beachgoers to return to the water. "It's OK now," he yelled at the top of his voice. "It's safe to go back



in for a swim. You don't have to worry about a thing because we're here to protect you and keep an eye on your safety."

"Good on you, Larry," called Gilbert. "We're so relieved to know you're on the job."

"Thanks, fellas," he replied. "Have a great day."

You couldn't help liking Larry and his quaint ways.

But his opinion of himself went up a few more notches when he commenced working with his dad as assistant punt driver. Old Ted found Larry eager to learn but easily distracted. When Ted wanted to give him instructions, Larry would be "busy" racing about the punt chatting to the occupants of the vehicles—especially the female passengers.

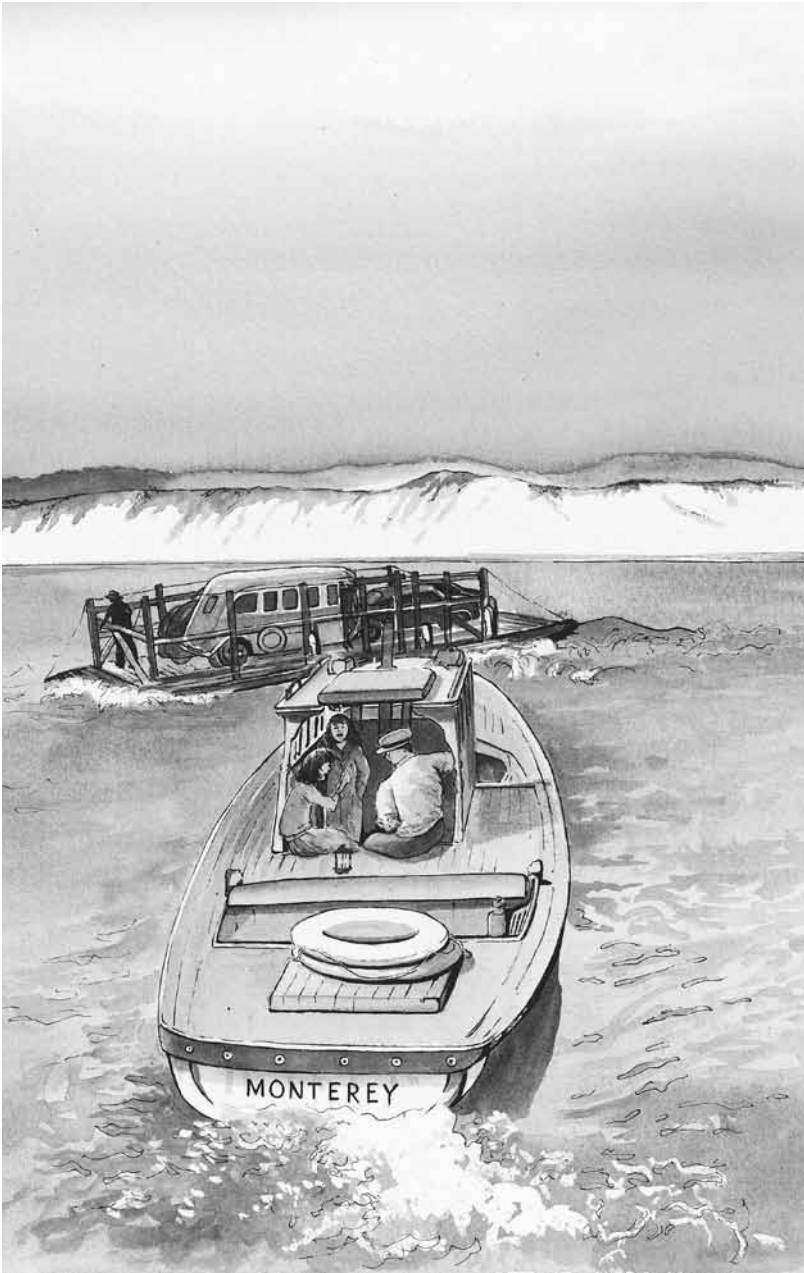
"Remember, Larry," Ted warned him. "It's against the rules to invite anyone to travel in the boat. You must never leave the wheelhouse when in motion and always wait for the deckhand to signal that everything is ready for departure."

The weeks and months went by and the punt travelled back and forth between Tuncurry and Forster. Though the punt had the occasional grounding on sandbars, it had no serious incidents. Then one day, old Ted got sick after working one wet, cold, stormy night.

"You're the skipper now, Larry," the old man whispered. "Try to remember what I have taught you and don't flirt with the girls. Keep your mind on the job—you have many lives to care for."

"OK, Dad," encouraged Larry. "You rest up good and don't worry about a thing. I'll be as right as rain. I can manage the punt as well as you can after all the practice I've had."

Some of the locals weren't as confident. In fact, they were downright alarmed at the idea of young Larry being in charge of such an important responsibility. The worst part was the idea of him controlling the punt at night—it was risky in





the best of conditions but on a dark, stormy night, it was dangerous. But there was no-one else to do the job.

Larry managed to get stuck on a sandbar on his first day as skipper. He drove the punt up onto the bar at full speed and was lucky the tide was coming in. He wasn't feeling quite as sure of himself as they sat out in the middle of the channel, waiting for the tide to rise. The drivers and passengers were not complimentary as they sat, trying to control their frustration. An hour and a half later, Larry was able to reverse off the bar and continue on his way.

"You'd better stand at the bow of the boat to keep watch," Larry suggested to the deckhand. "I'm not as tall as Dad, so it's harder for me to spot the sandbars."

"OK, Larry," he agreed. "But I'm not standing up front when it's raining or in a storm. I won't stand there all night either. We need more spotlights."

The town council agreed to add more lights, as they were getting complaints about the frequent delays due to Larry's habit of finding submerged sandbars. He was getting a different reputation to what he was hoping for—he was becoming known as the "worst skipper." People were starting to suspect there was even worse to come.

One cold, cloudy night, the darkness was so dense that it could almost be felt. The tide was going out swiftly, making it difficult to find the shifting sandbars. Visibility was made even more difficult by the strong easterly wind whipping up the waves.

"You should cancel this trip," warned the deckhand. "Even without sandbars, it's a bad night to be carrying a full load across the water. And don't think I'm going to stand up front in this drizzle."

But Larry was not listening—he was smiling and waving to

some girls in a nearby car. As they waved back, he couldn't resist the temptation to invite them to join him in the wheelhouse. It was warm and cosy in there so when Larry beckoned, the girls jumped out of their car, squeezed through the railing and hopped into the boat.

Larry was in his element, joking and flirting with the giggling girls. It was his opportunity to demonstrate how clever he was at controlling the boat and steering the punt across the water. As soon as he had settled his guests on the seat in the wheelhouse, he called to the deckhand to cast off and began to rev up the powerful diesel engine.

"Isn't this exciting!" exclaimed one of the girls. "We're heading off into the blackness and only Larry knows where we are going."

"It's a bit scary really," the other girl shuddered. "I'm glad we're in the boat and not in the car on the punt."

"Don't worry about a thing, girls," boasted Larry. "You're safe as can be here with me. Besides, we have life jackets if something happens. You just relax, we do up to 10 trips every day—we know what we are doing."

"You'd better take it easy and concentrate on what you're supposed to be doing," warned the deckhand. "Don't let these girls distract you on a night like this. They shouldn't be here and we should be back at the ramp."

"Relax, mate—you worry too much. We'll be on the other side before you know it."

As they got near the halfway mark, Larry slowed the engine down as they searched ahead for rough water that would indicate a sandbar.

"Take the wheel, mate," Larry called. "I'm going up front with the torch to try and spot any sand."

But before he could get up on deck, the punt made a



shuddery shake. As it made contact with the sand, the punt bulldozed its way into a sandbar. Larry quickly put the boat into reverse but it was too late. They were so firmly stuck that the engine was useless.

“I told you we should have cancelled the trip. Now we’re stuck with an ebb tide. It’ll be an hour before the tide turns and at least two hours before the incoming tide can lift us off the sandbar,” the deckhand complained.

A bus and four cars were stuck on Larry’s punt and the people would be very late getting home. Larry tried not to look at the girls he’d tried to impress. Their admiring eyes were now filled with scorn.

“What’s going on, Larry?” called the angry bus driver from his little window. “Can’t you back up and go around into deeper water?”

“Sorry, Fred, replied Larry. “We’re stuck and the tide is still going out. We’ll be here for at least three hours.” When the bus driver told this to his passengers, windows were flung open and they all let Larry know exactly what they thought of him. Soon a small crowd of people were storming about on the punt. It was fortunate for Larry that it began to rain, sending the angry passengers back to their cars.

The girls couldn’t leave quick enough. “I hope you get sacked for this,” the oldest girl called back angrily.

And that’s just what happened. A few days later, when he was well enough to go back to work, Ted took control of the punt and Larry was downgraded to deckhand. Larry was never the same after that experience—his voice became quieter, the wildness in his behaviour tamed and his boasting disappeared. Some claimed he just grew up. While the passengers on the punt that night did not need to endure such an experience, it seemed to be exactly what the worst skipper needed.



A NEW GIRL IN TOWN

All the boys were talking about the new girl who had just moved up from Newcastle. Her dad was a fisherman and they had moved into the campground by the saltwater swimming pool. They were living in two tents and finding things tough.

One cold, wet Sunday afternoon, when Bill and some of his mates were at the milk bar eating their favourite ice-cream, they were deep in lively conversation when Tom walked in. He was all excited about the new girl, Dorothy, who had just started school.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "She's something else. I can't stop thinking about her and when I see her, I get all flustered."

The boys all had a good laugh at Tom but had to admit the new girl really was kind of special. They noticed she was a little shy and nervous around boys though.

"It's no wonder," Ron said. "I hear that her dad is very protective of his daughters and has a bad temper. He's a tough character, so I would do all your admiring from a safe distance if I were you."



“Yeah,” added Gilbert. “Her dad got into a fight at the pub the other night, so be warned!”

The behaviour of the new fisherman soon branded him a person to keep well away from— especially if you were attracted to one of his daughters. As winter set in and the cold winds began to blow, some locals offered the new family winter clothing and blankets for the cold nights. Bill’s mum was one of the kind donors who made friends with Dorothy’s mother and found her to be a likeable person. On one of her visits, she took Bill along to help carry some boxes of vegetables. He was glad the father was away fishing so he could chat to Dorothy.

“What did you think of Dorothy?” Bill’s mum asked as they walked home. “She seems a very sweet little girl, doesn’t she?”

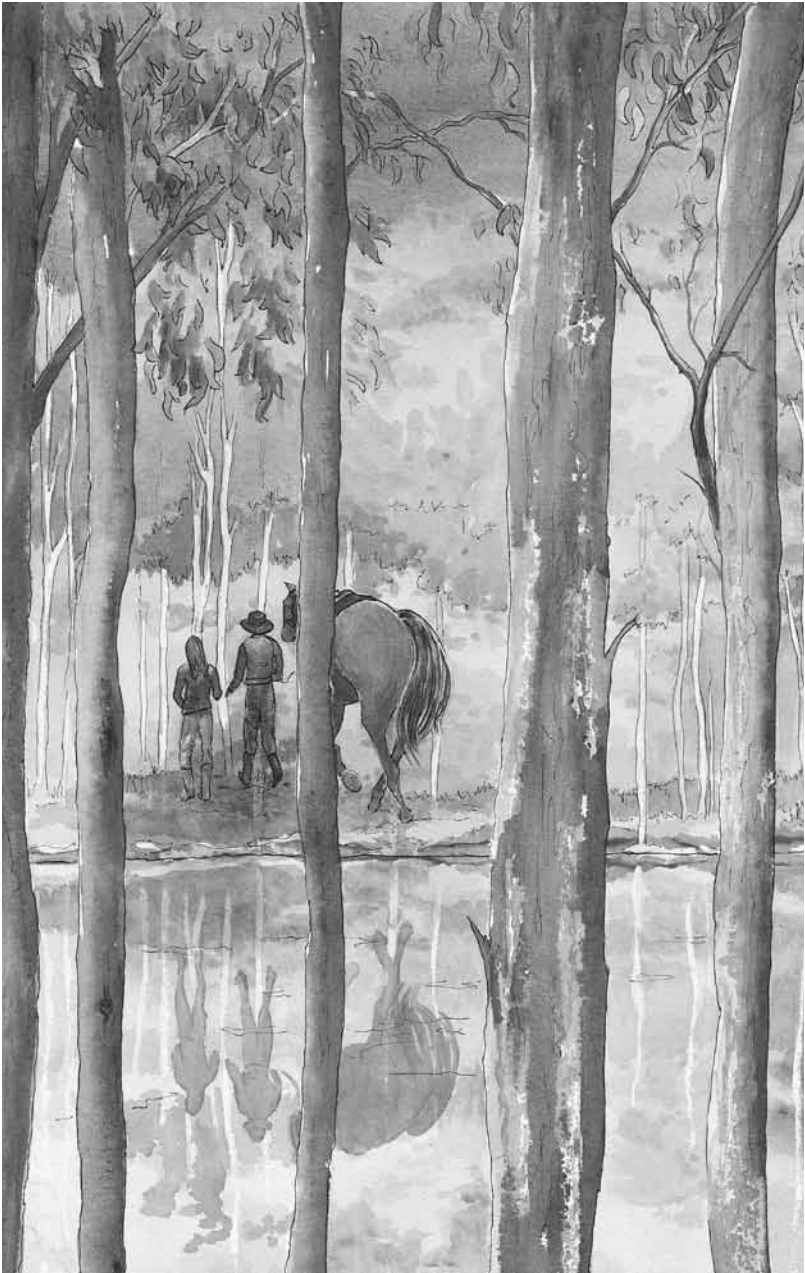
“Yes, she’s special,” Bill admitted. “But I plan to keep well away from her, as her dad’s bad news. His reputation is far from sweet. He has got all the boys scared off, so Dorothy isn’t likely to find herself a boyfriend in this town.”

The next time they visited the fisherman’s family, Bill rode his horse. He planned to ride off and join up with some of his horseriding mates for a cattle roundup after and was able to balance the heavy basket of cooking on the saddle.

“Horses are good for more than riding,” his mum commented as they walked into town. “I wonder if Dorothy can ride a horse,” she added.

Bill made no comment as he pictured Dorothy’s dad chasing him out of the campground and throwing stones at him as he galloped off down the road. Something like that had happened before.

When they arrived at the tents, Bill was relieved to find the fisherman absent but Dorothy at home and smiling in welcome.





"I love your horse, Bill. I've always wanted to learn to ride but Dad never let me join a pony club or have lessons. Could I sit on your horse while you lead him around, please?"

Bill looked up and down the road to make sure her dad wasn't on his way home and quickly agreed.

He enjoyed helping Dorothy to mount up. He led his horse out the gate and down the road. He was just turning around to go back to her tent when Tom happened to pass them on his bicycle.

"Hi, Tom!" called Bill. "How's things?" When Tom saw Bill leading his horse with Dorothy in the saddle, he nearly fell off his bike. He couldn't believe it! He muddled a reply, gave a wave and rode off.

"Have you met Tom yet?" Bill asked. "He's a real decent bloke. He thinks you're pretty special, too."

Bill was taken by surprise when Dorothy replied, "I'm pleased you think I'm special. I think you're alright, too, and I'd like to be your friend. The trouble is, my dad doesn't like boys coming to visit and refuses to let me go out alone."

"Well, at least you can go to school without a chaperone," Bill prompted. "Maybe I can walk you home after school sometimes?"

"My two sisters would have to walk with us," Dorothy explained. "But they mostly run ahead so we could talk easily enough."

So, it started. As often as he could, Bill walked Dorothy home after school. Sometimes he wheeled his bike as they walked or led his horse. Whatever his transport, he was always on the lookout for Dorothy's dad, ready to make a quick getaway.

One wet Sunday afternoon, when Bill and some of his mates were quietly chatting in their favourite milk bar, Tom

brought up the subject of Dorothy again. "How come you managed to get on the right side of her parents and take on the task of personal escort home from school?"

"Yes Bill, what have you got that we haven't got?" Ron teased.

"It's the horse," chuckled Gilbert. "If you want to get in good with Dorothy, you'll have to buy a horse."

"It's just that my mum has made friends with Dorothy's mother. She takes her some cooking or vegetables each week and often asks me to carry the goodies on my horse. Whenever Dorothy is home, I give her a ride on my horse. She loves horses," Bill laughed.

"I'll bet you make sure she's home when you go a visiting," grinned Rex. The teasing continued but Bill knew his mates wished they had been so lucky.

All except Ron, who continued warning Bill. "You'd better keep a sharp eye open for her dad. He's a nasty piece of works and has a fiery temper, Bill. I heard he keeps a hard, flat plank of pinewood just inside the tent flap for walloping his daughters when he thinks they need it. Who knows what he would do to you if he caught you with Dorothy!"

But with Dorothy's encouragement, Bill ignored the warning and continued to walk her to the corner of her street before heading home. They became a familiar sight as they walked along the edge of the lake, absorbed in each other's company. It was only a matter of time before someone mentioned the daily event to Dorothy's father.

He fumed about what he would do to Bill and the rumours of his threats spread. One day, he left work early and hid in the tent. When Bill stopped at the corner to say farewell to Dorothy, her father ran out from the tent. He brandished his piece of pinewood and yelled at Bill like a mad bull. Bill got



the shock of his life and did the fastest take-off ever seen. His horse was in full gallop before he had settled into the saddle.

When he looked back, he cried out in shock. Dorothy's father was belting her with his makeshift weapon and he could hear her cries from down the road. They stayed with him all the way home and though his mother tried to console him that night, Bill was too distressed to eat or be pacified.

Dorothy was not at school the next day and the headmaster announced that she was being sent back to Newcastle to live with her grandparents. This was devastating news and earned Bill some sharp looks from his classmates. There were the usual comments of "I told you so," which made Bill feel as miserable as an orphan calf.

"Why wouldn't you listen to me?" Ron scolded. "It was your fault she got a beating and was sent away."

Bill didn't need reminding.

Bill's mum continued to visit the fisherman's wife. She was able to pass on little messages Dorothy sent for Bill but they only made him feel worse. At the end of the fishing season, the family packed up and returned to Newcastle. Some were sorry to see them go, while most were relieved to see the last of a family controlled by such a cruel man. He hadn't made a single friend while he had been in town and had done his best to ruin any of his family's friendships as well.



THE STAMP COLLECTION

One day, a kind friend gave Bill an old stamp album. His friend wasn't a collector but he had found it among his father's belongings after he had passed away. There were a lot of old Australian stamps, as well as some from other countries.

Some of Bill's mates collected stamps so he decided to become a collector, too. He didn't really know what it was all about but it sounded impressive. He soon realised you could learn a lot about countries and people from stamps. He was suddenly in an exclusive club and Bill increasingly enjoyed his new hobby. He sent away to receive a monthly catalogue to order stamps he wanted to add to his collection.

One of the most enthusiastic collectors among his mates was a boy called Woody. He wasn't a horse rider, nor did he hang out at the local milk bar. The only time he mixed with the others was at the beach, otherwise he stayed home.

On one occasion, some of Bill's friends visited him and



played in the huge Moreton Bay fig tree that spread its long, crooked branches over half the backyard. Bill invited them all to have a look at his stamp collection. While they sat in the kitchen enjoying the fruit juice Bill's mum had prepared, Bill placed the stamp collection album on the table for all to see.

"Wow!" exclaimed Woody. "You have some valuable stamps here. These kangaroos and Harbour Bridge stamps are worth heaps."

"Really? I had no idea they were worth much. I just enjoy looking at them and adding to my collection."

All the boys were impressed as they studied the neatly arranged sets of stamps. But it was Woody who paid the most attention. In fact, he seemed quite envious of the Australian stamps in particular.

"How about some swaps?" he suggested. "You have two of some old ones but there are some missing here and there. Maybe I can find some to fill in the gaps in exchange for some of your extras."

"That sounds like a good idea," Bill agreed. "We can get together one Sunday and compare our collections."

At that moment, Bill felt a kick under the table. When he looked in Tom's direction, he noticed a look of caution on his face.

Later, as the boys were leaving, Tom stopped to caution Bill. "Be careful, mate. Woody's a bit dodgy when it comes to wheeling and dealing so make sure there's a third person present when you do any swapping."

"Thanks, Tom," whispered Bill. "I will."

It was more than a month before Bill and Woody got together for a session with their stamps. Bill invited Rex to join them, as he was a keen collector with a good knowledge of stamps and their value.





“Let’s make a list of stamps you need to complete your sets and then I will make a list. We’ll see if we can do some swapping,” suggested Woody.

“We don’t have time to go through all our countries,” Bill said. “Let’s just concentrate on our Australian sets.”

So the three boys explored each other’s albums, noting any gaps that showed up. When it came time for swapping, Rex came in very handy. Woody was obviously seeking to take advantage of Bill, who was still a learner. Woody was keen to pass off some of his common stamps in exchange for Bill’s older stamps, which were out of circulation and quite valuable.

“You’re not being fair with some of your swaps, Woody,” insisted Rex. “You should only exchange stamps of equal value. Some of your stamps have slight defects.”

It wasn’t long before the atmosphere became tense as Woody’s face grew red and his swapping more insistent. Bill and Rex suggested it was time to leave. Out on the footpath, Rex advised Bill to do his own collecting and forget about swapping.

“Thanks for your help. I can see now that Woody’s out for the best in any exchange,” said Bill. “I’ll complete my sets from the catalogue.”

Around this time, Bill’s mum decided it was time to return to New Zealand for a holiday. Bill’s dad agreed that Bill and his mum would go by ship to visit her parents in Auckland for three weeks. Bill forgot all about Woody in the excitement of bookings and boats. They were going on the *Wanganella* from Sydney to Auckland three days later. Bill’s mates were envious of his trip to another country and as they talked so much at their favourite milk bar, their ice-cream melted.

“How big’s the ship?” Gilbert asked. “Is it like the *Titanic*?”

Will you have your own cabin or share with your mum?"

"It's pretty big. There are four decks for passengers," Bill explained. "We're on C-deck, on the third level. I'll be sharing a cabin with another boy, so we'll be able to explore the ship together."

Soon after, Bill and his mum sailed across the Tasman Sea for their New Zealand holiday. Bill enjoyed spending time with his grandparents and meeting lots of relatives. He also enjoyed visiting new places and learning about the land of his birth. The weeks raced by and it was soon time to return to Australia, the place he now called home.

On the first Sunday after his return, Bill quickly found his mates for a catch up at the milk bar. They nearly exhausted him with their questions but it was fun to be the centre of attention for a change.

A few days later, Bill received a stamp catalogue. He saw some stamps he wanted to add to his collection and decided it was a good time to fill in some gaps in his special sets. But when he sat down to inspect his album, he was astonished to discover that some of the pages were missing.

Bill's album was loose leaf, so it was easy to add or remove a page. Bill soon discovered that many of his best stamps had disappeared. Ugly, blank gaps stared back at him from other sets where individual stamps had been removed. Bill felt a twisting knot growing within him.

"Mum!" he yelled. "Someone has stolen some of my best stamps."

Bill rushed to show her, his breath heavy with shock. The idea that someone had been in the house and gone through his collection was distressing. He stared around wildly, wondering if anything else was missing.

"Are you sure?" his mum asked, taking the album for a



second look. "Who would do such a thing? You'd better have a good search before you spread that around. Fancy someone breaking in while we were away!"

Bill searched but there was no way around it. While he and his mum were absent, someone had been in their house and taken the best of his collection.

"Do you have any idea who might have done such a thing?" asked Bill's mum. "Surely one of your mates wouldn't do that?"

"The only person who wanted those particular stamps was Woody," Bill murmured, unable to stop the pain in his stomach. "He must have got into the house while Dad was at work and helped himself."

"It may be hard to prove," his mum warned. "You must be careful not to falsely accuse him. He could get nasty."

The next time Bill met with his mates at their favourite milk bar, he mentioned his loss but kept his suspicions to himself.

"That's a rotten thing for anyone to do," Tom said. "We'd better keep our ears open in case someone talks."

"Yeah, and maybe we should do the rounds of all the stamp collectors we know," said Rex, sending a knowing look in Bill's direction.

A few days later, Rex was talking to Woody at school and happened to mention that Bill had been robbed of his best stamps.

"That is bad news," cried Woody. "I can't imagine who would do such a thing."

Despite his quiet investigating, Bill never did find out who stole his stamps. His loss made a big hole in his collection but he didn't give up on his new hobby.

"I'm glad you didn't get discouraged over the theft of your

best stamps," said Bill's mum as they walked to town one day. "We must never let a setback put us off doing things that interest us. On every journey, there are always hills to climb."

"I'll keep collecting and one day I'll have the best collection ever," Bill replied.

And he did.



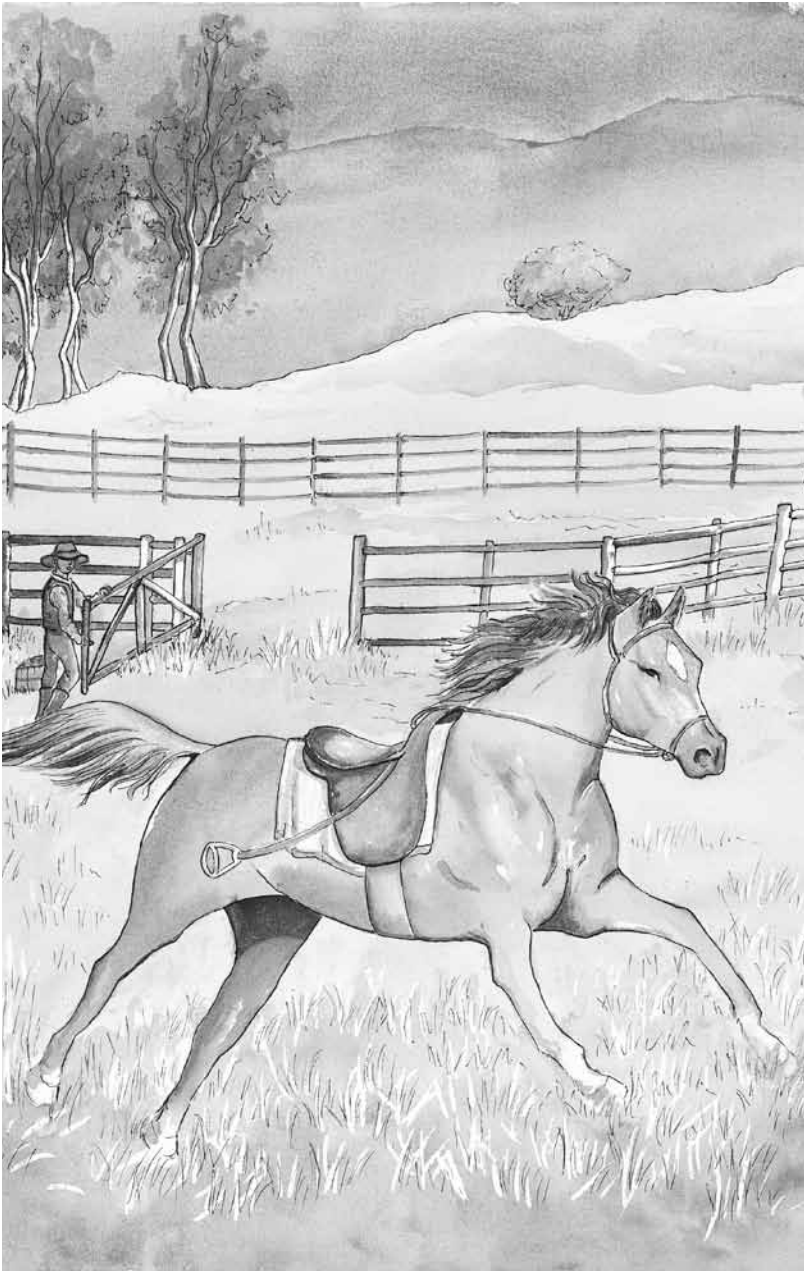
NEW TRICKS

Bill had heard the saying, “It’s hard to teach old dogs new tricks” but he didn’t think it applied to horses. Horses are much smarter than dogs, he thought. They learn new things all the time!

On many of Bill’s cattle roundups, he had admired the way experienced horsemen controlled their horses. Their horses would stand still out in the bush or in a paddock while their masters repaired fences or attended to newborn calves. He never saw one of their horses run away or play hard to catch.

Bill had never taken a risk with his horse. Sox was about nine years old and had grown up on a dairy farm. He wasn’t too sure what she knew about behaving as a stock horse so he decided to give her some lessons.

The old farmhouse they rented three miles (five kilometres) out of town had a small horse paddock. It also had a cowshed with three bales for milking their six cows, a feed shed and a yard with a high railing fence. The buildings had once been part of a thriving dairy farm and the surrounding land still





belonged to a large dairy farm. The main dairy was on the other side of a tree-covered hill.

When no-one was looking, Bill took his horse to the stockyard. He started his horse cantering around the yard, then tried to stand up like the trick riders at the circus. He had lots of spills but it wasn't far to the ground. He taught Sox to come when he whistled and to stand still when he dropped the reins. He could walk away and she would remain standing. Sox could be just as clever as the stock horses after all.

One day when a group of stockmen were out looking for stray cattle, one of the stockmen got off his horse to open a gate. He dropped the reins over the saddle and let his horse stand quietly while he undid the gate. The stockman then swung the gate open and called the other riders to move through into the next paddock. His horse remained standing until all the riders had passed through, then the stockman called his horse to follow the last rider. As soon as his horse went through the opening, he turned and waited for his owner to shut the gate. Then the stockman mounted up and they rode off as though nothing had happened.

Bill was fascinated by the obedient horse's behaviour. It was so simple, he decided he would have to teach Sox to do that. So the next day after school, he caught Sox, saddled her up and led her into the stockyard. They didn't have a gate, only slip rails, but Bill reckoned it wouldn't make any difference.

He led the mare up to the slip rails, dropped the reins and told her to "stand." Then he opened the rails, walked through and called the mare to walk through. She responded to the usual clicking sounds, stepped over the rails and stood waiting while Bill replaced the rails. He then mounted up

and rode Sox around the small paddock a few times before repeating the lesson.

It looked as though Sox understood what was expected of her. Bill practised three or four more times, just to make sure. In just an hour or so, his horse could become just as smart as the best of them. He couldn't wait to show off his clever horse.

A few days later, Bill rode across country to visit some friends who worked a small, mixed farm. He had fun with them and when it was time to head off, his friends loaded him up with a box of fresh vegetables. He mounted up and when it was handed up to him, he placed the large box on the pommel of the saddle.

When Bill arrived at the gate of his friend's property, he placed the box on top of a fence post before he dismounted to open the gate. He dropped the reins as Sox stood waiting calmly and opened the gate. He signalled for Sox to step forward as he held the gate open for her to pass through. How smart she was now!

But when Bill turned to close the gate, Sox seemed to forget all the lessons. She swung her head up to stop the reins tripping her, flicked her tail and took off at a gallop for home. Bill stood with his mouth open for a while before any words came out. When they finally did, they were wasted on Sox—she was well out of earshot as she galloped across the open ground.

Bill was still muttering darkly when he arrived home, carrying the heavy box of vegetables. The long walk hadn't improved his disgust at Sox's behaviour. The mare was waiting for Bill at the gate to the paddock with a wicked gleam in her eye. She didn't get any extra oats that evening.

"How come the horse got home before you?" Bill's mum asked. "Did you fall off?"



“No,” muttered Bill darkly. “She took off while I was closing the gate. I thought I had trained her to stand and wait but she made a fool of me.”

“Well, it’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks,” his mum commented. “In this case, Sox proved it can apply to horses, too.”



THE SILLY HORSE

Bill was asked to work with a horse that was becoming hard to handle. He agreed to try the animal out for a few weeks but gave no promises. If this horse had been ruined by careless handling, there wasn't much anyone could do.

The lady who had bought the horse didn't know much about horses but her son was keen to learn to ride. The man who sold her the horse had taken advantage of her ignorance. He had obviously wanted to get rid of the animal that looked like an ideal children's pony but was anything but.

"Would you please see if you can calm this horse so Tim can ride it?" the lady asked. "It's very excitable and hard for Tim to control."

"I'll see what I can do," said Bill. "But if he's too highly strung, he may not be the right horse for your boy to learn on."

"We would be grateful if you would take him home and ride him for awhile. We're frightened to take him out of the yard in case he bolts with Tim."



Bill put a halter on the fidgety horse and led him home. Bill examined the horse's teeth and estimated that he was about nine years old. He was a nice-looking animal, with a long mane and tail, good strong legs and nice markings.

"What have you got there?" Bill's mum called. "Are you trading horses or just increasing your stud farm?"

"No, Mum, I'm going to give Sox a rest and ride this horse for Tim's mother. She wants him to learn to ride but he's finding the horse hard to control."

"Just be careful then," his mum advised. "There are always risks when you ride someone else's horse."

That night, Bill left the new horse in the cowyard and let his mare enjoy her paddock. He groomed them both before he gave them a bundle of lucerne hay. He found the new horse easy to handle and as quiet as a mouse.

"Maybe you will be different when I take you for a ride," he muttered to the horse as he closed the gate.

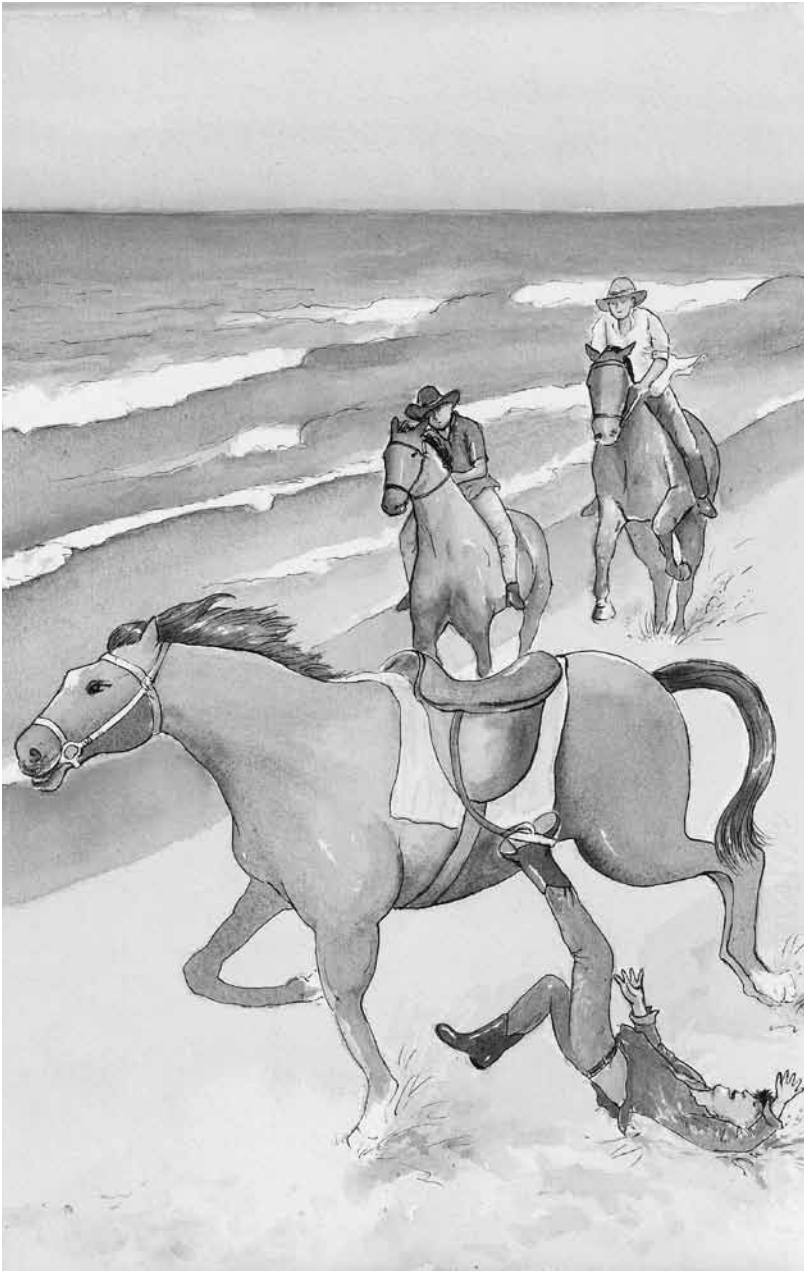
It was two days before Bill had a chance to saddle up the new horse and lead him out of the yard for a ride through the bush. As soon as he mounted up, the horse changed into a different animal. He began to jig around and head in his own direction.

"Whoa! Take it easy," murmured Bill. "What's your hurry?"

The horse was obviously in a mad hurry to go anywhere except where Bill wanted to go. A contest quickly developed between horse and boy as Bill tried to head him off along the bush track. With some perseverance, Bill managed to get him underway. Even then, the horse wouldn't settle as he threw his head in the air, jumped about and tried to bolt.

"I know what I'll name you," Bill declared. "'The Silly Horse'—you're the dumbest horse I've ever ridden."

Perhaps the horse had heard the name before. He took no





notice, continuing to shake Bill until his breakfast turned into a milkshake. Bill struggled with the contrary beast until his body needed a rest. His bones were so rattled and his insides so jolted that he had to dismount and lead the Silly Horse all the way home.

Bill decided Silly might behave better if he was with other horses. It was easy to round up a group of mates for a Sunday ride. They were happy to try to help Bill solve the Silly Horse problem. It was set for 9 o'clock.

"Hey Bill, let's head for One Mile Beach," suggested Rex. "We could have a few races on the sand and take the horses for a swim."

"Sounds good," agreed Bill. The others agreed as well.

"It'll be good for our horses to have a swim in the salt water."

"First of all, I have to get this dumb horse heading in the right direction," Bill moaned, pulling on the reins. Bill strained to get Silly to move with the other horses. But Silly loped into the front, threatening to break into a gallop. Bill held him back, afraid the horse might bolt but the more Bill restrained him, the more he jumped and jiggled.

"What a stupid horse you've got there," shouted Ron. "Wait until we get down to the beach, then you can let him have his head. If you can't pull him up, you can steer him into the soft sand. That'll soon slow him down."

By the time they arrived at the beach, Bill was well and truly shaken up and Silly was covered in sweat. Not only was Silly badly behaved, Bill discovered the left side of his mouth was soft while the right side was hard. It was impossible to turn Silly to the right. Bill found that to make a right turn, he had to go the long way, turning Silly to the left until they were facing the way he wanted to go.

"That's one crazy horse," laughed Rex. "Someone sure made

a mess of breaking him in.”

“Or maybe he had an accident and damaged his mouth,” suggested Ron. “Someone’s been riding him for a few years without too much trouble or he would have been sold to the knackery by now.”

“More likely he had an accident which spoilt his brain,” growled Tom.

“If he doesn’t change his ways,” muttered Bill, “he’ll be heading in that direction very soon.”

As soon as they arrived on One Mile Beach, they agreed to a race. The tide was out so there was plenty of hard sand for them to ride abreast as they galloped along the mile-long stretch. As they approached the rocks at the northern end, the riders pulled their horses up for a rest. Silly was willing to slow down as he saw the other horses coming to a stop.

“Your jitterbug is quite fast,” commented Ron. “He would be a handful if he bolted.”

“Yes,” agreed Bill. “He’s dangerously unpredictable and his mouth problem makes him almost impossible to steer.”

“Let me have a go on him for the race back,” suggested Rex. “Maybe a change of rider will confuse him, keep him guessing. He’s so cranky.”

“I’m only too happy to swap horses.”

As soon as Rex was in the saddle, Silly took off at full gallop. He caught everyone else by surprise and it was an effort to catch up. Silly was determined to stay in front but halfway down the beach, two people were settling down to sunbake. As the four horses raced toward them, one of them decided to shake out a bright red towel.

Seeing it, Silly jumped sideways while at full gallop. Rex was a good rider—but not that good. The sudden jolt caused Rex to lose his balance and part company with Silly.



Unfortunately, his foot stayed firmly in the stirrup. He was left swinging, head bumping the sand, as the horse raced on.

When Bill and his mates began to catch up, Silly tried all the more to keep in front. The boys were scared Silly might trample on Rex's head, which was far too close to Silly's back legs.

"We have to hang back and hope Silly slows down," shouted Bill. "See if you can go up into the soft sand and head him off, Ron."

"I'll try but it's hard to outrun him when he's on harder sand."

As the boys slowed their horses, Silly started to slacken his pace as well. Bill jumped off his borrowed horse and ran after the frightened horse, calling for him to stop.

"Whoa there. Whoa!" he called as he caught up to the now-trotting horse. "Steady boy."

By now, Bill was level with Silly. With a quick stretch, he grabbed the swinging reins. As soon as he stopped the horse, he released Rex's foot from the stirrup and Rex dropped to the sand.

"Phew!" moaned Rex. "That was close. I've never been so scared in all my life. I can't believe that stupid horse didn't kick my head in."

"Are you OK?" asked Ron, his face tight with fear. "We thought you were a goner!"

"I'm alright," replied Rex, lying on the sand like a stunned mullet. "A few bruises." He rubbed his foot where the stirrup had held him, then he felt the back of his head. "A few bumps that shouldn't be there but I'll survive. One thing's for sure though—I won't ever get back on that dumb horse again."

As soon as Bill and Rex swapped horses, the boys rode along to the southern end of the beach. They were hot and

flustered from their gallop, so they decided to take the horses for a swim. They rode up onto the soft sand, where they unsaddled their horses and rode them bareback into the shallow water.

Silly hesitated, snorting as the waves lapped around his hooves. But when he saw the other horses going further into the sea, he quickly followed. As the waves came up to the horses' stomachs, they began to kick at the frothy water with their front legs and move into deeper water.

"Lucky there isn't a big surf on," called Ron. "My horse wants to swim around and have a good bath."

"They all seem to want to get into deep water," Tom said. "My horse likes to stick his head under the waves as they come rolling in. They love the salt water even more than we do."

"Even Silly's starting to enjoy himself," laughed Bill.

People walked to the edge of the water, watching the four boys ride their horses in the surf. Even some fishermen pulling their dinghy up onto the dry sand stopped to watch. Bill made the mistake of relaxing and forgot about Silly's steering problem.

Silly turned to face a wave and started to head straight out to sea. The wave was larger than most and washed Bill right off Silly's back, into the water. Bill still held the reins but it was Silly's right side that Bill was pulling on—the side that did not work. They were now in deep water and Bill could not touch the bottom. The horse was pulling him out, away from shore in the direction of New Zealand.

"Let him go," shouted Tom. "He'll drown you if you let him drag you out into the ocean." So Bill let go of the reins and swam back to the beach, glumly watching Silly head out to sea.

"Quick, Bill," yelled Ron. "Jump on behind me and we'll



race down to the fishermen. Maybe they will take us out to try to rescue Silly.”

The fishermen were already pushing their dingy out into the waves in the hope of catching up to the horse before he got too far out to sea. “Hop in, boys,” they called. “We’ll have to hurry if we’re to get that horse before the sharks do.”

Ron and Bill leapt into the boat and were off, bouncing over the waves in pursuit of Silly. He was disappearing toward the horizon and it took awhile to catch up to the struggling horse. Silly was wide-eyed with fear as he battled the waves.

“Get ready to grab the reins,” instructed the driver as he turned the boat in the direction of the beach. “Just watch that he doesn’t pull you into the water.”

Bill reached out and caught the reins as the boat came level with the horse. He clung to the side of the boat as he pulled the horse around. It was quite an effort to keep hold of Silly while the boat rose and fell with the waves. When they eventually reached the beach, Bill jumped out of the boat and led a very tired Silly up onto the soft sand.

“You’re lucky we were here today,” said the fisherman. “That horse was determined to swim all the way to New Zealand. The trouble is, he would have soon turned into shark food. There are a lot of hungry monsters out there.”

“We’re sure grateful for your help,” Bill said. “He isn’t my horse. I was so scared we might lose him and I can’t give him back to his owners soon enough.”

“I think we’ve had enough excitement for one day,” Tom sighed. “Let’s go home. You can take that dope of a horse back where he belongs.”

The boys gave Bill an escort back to his place, knowing just how silly the horse could be. But the horse was worn out, walking along as quiet as a lamb. Back in the stockyard, Bill

saddled up Sox and led Silly back to his owners.

"I don't think this horse is suitable for Tim to learn to ride on," he advised Tim's mum. "He's hard to control and unsafe to ride."

That evening, as Bill and his parents sat talking at the meal table, he shared the day's adventures with them.

"You were lucky you didn't have an accident on that crazy horse. Someone ruined him at some point in his life," Bill's dad said crossly. "No horse is of use if he can't be controlled."

"Well," said Bill's mum, "people are like that, too. We must be very careful how we treat those we meet along the way. A lot of people have been spoilt through unkindness, bullying and even careless words."

"Silly's biggest problem was his mouth," stated Bill. "It was impossible to control him, even when riding around with other horses. He would be hopeless as a stock horse."

"Now, isn't that interesting?" mused Bill's mum. "There are so many people out there like that. We must be careful not to lose control of our mouths."

They all chuckled at the comparison and enjoyed their dinner.



THE SPEEDBOAT

Have you heard the news, Bill?" his mum asked with a smile. "We're having a youth camp at our place!"

"All the church youth, staying at our place?" gaped Bill, looking around. "Where will we put them all? And how will we feed them?"

"It's all arranged. They'll set up tents in our yard. There will be a special place for showers and temporary toilets behind the hen house," explained Bill's mum. "All the cooking will be done in our kitchen and we'll all eat together in a large tent they'll set up for meetings and music."

"It sounds great! We'll get to meet the new assistant pastor. He can meet us all at one time!" cheered Bill.

The camp was to be from Thursday night to Monday night. It would be a first for Bill and some of the other young people, and each day would be packed with activities. The program would give the new assistant minister a chance to show off his talents.

Most of the young people were brought by car but some

had to come by bus. On the Thursday evening, there was more traffic than Bill had ever seen around their house. By sunset, the yard was filled with tents and the air was filled with happy voices calling out to each other.

The milk, cream and butter the cows provided came in very useful, as did the eggs from Bill's hens. Most of the campers also brought produce from their gardens and the pastor had organised a local store to provide all the other food for the camp.

"It's my pleasure to welcome you all to this youth camp. I'd like to introduce my new assistant, who is fresh out of college," announced the pastor after the evening meal. "We have an exciting program prepared for you and I know you will cooperate with us as we enjoy this long weekend together. My new assistant will now take our evening worship."

The young man looked as though he would prefer to be somewhere else. His "pastoral" stiff white shirt, black tie and black trousers looked out of place among all the casually-dressed campers who watched him closely.

Some of them felt sorry for him as he stumbled through his longwinded worship. Others felt sorry for themselves while some found him amusing. The young man knew he was on trial, which made the situation all the more stressful. He battled bravely through and gave a big sigh as he sat down.

Afterward, the pastor announced the rest of the camp's events. Bill found his home had been happily invaded, like a billeted army. There had never been such a big sleepover. As everyone settled down for the first night, the peace was shattered by a scream from the tent belonging to the new minister.

"Help!" he yelled, nearly demolishing his tent in his hurry to break out. "There's an animal in my sleeping-bag!"



One of the older boys took his torch and bravely went to the rescue. After dragging the sleeping-bag out into the open, he tipped it up and gave it a good shake. Much to his surprise, a blue-tongued lizard fell onto the ground.

“He won’t hurt you,” the boy assured the young minister. “He was just looking for a warm place to sleep.”

Judging by the sniggers coming from the surrounding tents, it was no accident that the lizard found his way into that sleeping bag. The young minister realised that this camp would make or break his ability to serve as a leader among these country young people.

The next day, the first activity was on the beach, a short walk away.

“Hey! Check out our new minister,” yelled Rex as the group scrambled down onto the beach. “He looks like he’s going to church.”

“What’s with the black tie?” Joy murmured. “And how about the shoes and socks?”

“This guy’s real entertainment value,” Kevin laughed.

“Maybe we should ignore his fancy dress and befriend the guy behind the tie,” suggested Jack. “You mean help him to feel like one of us?” They all looked at him doubtfully but agreed to give him a chance.

“Are you coming in for a swim?” Jack asked.

“No, not now,” the young minister replied. “Actually, I don’t know how to swim.”

This stunned them more than his tie, shoes and socks. At least they managed to persuade him to remove these for the beach games. When he removed his tie, he almost looked normal. He showed them he could catch a ball and use a bat, even if he couldn’t swim.

They were all happy to respond to the whistle that signalled





it was time to head back to the house for lunch. There were signs of sunburn and many healthy appetites.

The pastor gave them all plenty of thinking challenges to take to their sleeping-bags on the Saturday night. It had been a full and enjoyable day, with meetings and a bushwalk.

A special day of activity had been planned for Sunday. They would all hike down to the village for a swim in the local pool and after a picnic lunch, they would take turns riding in a speedboat.

The pastor had arranged for a friend of his to take groups of six on a fast trip around some of the waterways and channels of Wallis Lake. They had chosen a wharf where there were steps down onto a pontoon. Here, it was easy to step into the speedboat, which was tied to the pontoon. When they arrived, they found the tide was going out swiftly so they needed to step carefully.

Before the first group could jump on, the boat owner called to the young pastor. He wanted him to come aboard and hold the boat close to the pontoon but not too close, as the owner didn't want his boat to get scratched by the rough edge.

"Just stand about halfway along the boat and lean over so you keep a gap about a foot wide. That will make it easy for people to jump on," the owner instructed. "Just hold onto the railing but keep a strong grip as the tide is quite strong."

No-one saw any need to mention that the young man holding the boat steady for everyone was the only one who couldn't swim. Nothing was going to go wrong—the day was too perfect.

As each passenger jumped on board, the boat inched further away from the pontoon. This meant the young pastor had to lean further over to keep hold of the railing. The last passenger was reluctant to jump aboard and while she was

being urged to step across the gap, it grew even wider.

"Hey!" yelled Bill. "Our new pastor's getting stretched."

"He sure is," laughed Rex. "He'll soon be horizontal. You'll be able to walk across him to get into the boat."

The young man was red faced as he clung to the railing with his fingers and to the gunwale of the boat with his toes. Suddenly, the frightened girl made her leap over the widening gap, landing in the boat with a thump that rocked it just enough. The movement sent the assistant pastor dropping straight down into the fast-moving water with a splash and cry.

"Quick! Throw him a rope," shouted Jack. "He can't swim."

"Throw that rope at the stern," instructed the boat owner, as the young pastor struggled in the water. "Pull him aboard from the side so that he doesn't get caught up in the propeller."

The young man was soon on board, sitting in his soaking wet white shirt and black trousers. Some one kindly loaned him a beach towel to keep him warm as the boat sped around the lake. They had a thrilling ride as the boat turned and slid around the sandbars, across its own wake and back to the pontoon.

"You'd better get out of those wet clothes and dry out," called the pastor.

He kept the towel and changed into a T-shirt that someone kindly loaned him. Now he was beginning to look like the rest of the group. For the rest of the camp, the group teased the young man about his misadventure with the speedboat. He took it well and joined in with the laughter. The only regret was that no-one had a camera. The event was the highlight of the camp and the beginning of a happy relationship between the church youth group and the new assistant minister.



TO CATCH A SNAKE

Bill was reading on his bed when he heard an incredible racket going on in front of the house.

“What in the world?” he muttered. “It sounds like all the birds in the neighbourhood are having a fight.”

He climbed through his bedroom window and stood on the verandah, where he had a good view of the front yard. There was a big paddock in front of the house and about 20 metres (22 yards) from the front fence was an unusual sight.

A dozen birds of various sizes and colours were diving and screeching at something on the ground so Bill decided to have a closer look. As he approached the protesting birds, he noticed something moving on the ground. He had to creep closer before he could make it out but when he did, he saw a huge black snake! It was trying to avoid the attacking birds and was heading straight for the house.

Bill kept out of range as the reptile remained on course. He could only watch as the snake wriggled under the garden gate and disappeared under the house. The noisy birds stationed

themselves in the trees around the house and kept up their indignant cries over the snake's presence. The unwanted predator had invaded their domain.

That evening, Bill made his announcement. "There's a massive black snake living under the house. The birds have gone crazy."

"I don't think it'll stay long," Bill's dad smiled. "Our dogs will make it feel unwelcome and, besides, there's too much action around the house."

"Just the same," Bill's mum added, "we'd better be on our guard, especially when we go outside at night."

The next day, Bill noticed while feeding his hens that two chickens were missing. The old black hen looked forlorn. That night they noticed their tabby cat was looking a bit sick. By the time morning came, it had died.

"That black snake has stayed too long. You'd better keep an eye out when you're outside, Mum," Bill warned.

Things were quiet for a few days but everyone was on their guard. Then, on a sunny afternoon while Bill's mum was weeding her garden, the birds began to sound the alarm again. When she straightened, she saw the snake slither under a pile of wood that was stacked against the back fence.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed. "That beast is still hanging around."

She pulled at her apron, frowning. The creature had already killed two chickens and her precious cat. Something had to be done so she called the dogs and led them over to the woodpile. The dogs soon picked up the scent and circled excitedly but there wasn't much they could do.

Over the next few days, there were more sightings but the snake was always close to a good hiding place. At least the dogs knew it was around and were often seen frantically sniffing around the edge of the house.



Then a near tragedy took place. It was washing day and Bill's mum had her basket full to overflowing. As she edged down the steps on her way to the clothesline, her arms full of washing, she felt something like a garden hose under her foot. The next thing she knew, the giant snake was wrapped around her leg.

"Help!" she screamed, throwing the basket of clothes in the air and leaping sideways to free her leg from the writhing snake. Fortunately, she had trodden on its head as it lay sunbaking on the bottom step.

Bill's mum ran one way and the startled snake went another as she desperately called the dogs. They bounded over, busily sniffing around until they were on the trail of the snake but it was too late—it was safely holed up under the house once again. It took Bill's mum a long time before she could relax enough to get on with the task of hanging up the washing.

"We have to be constantly on our guard," Bill's dad warned when he heard what had happened.

"How can I be on my guard when I'm carrying a basket of washing?" Bill's mum asked. "We have to find a way to get rid of it."

"Bill, why don't you talk to some of your horsey mates, see if they have any suggestions," Bill's dad asked.

"OK. A few of us are going out to round up some stray cattle on Sunday, I'll ask then."

When Bill explained their snake problem and told the story of his mum's adventure, Bill didn't get the reaction he expected. The stockmen nearly fell off their horses laughing. The story of Bill's mum treading on the snake's head kept them chuckling for the rest of the day. However, they did give Bill some advice.

"As you pass the old shed on your way home," Ron's dad





said, "you'll see a roll of wire netting. It's the kind we put around a chicken coop. Just take it home and roll it out flat. Use some bricks to hold it down close to the ground. Do it near the back of the house and you'll catch your snake."

"How does it work?" asked Bill.

"Well, snakes aren't as smart as they think they are," Ron's dad explained. "When it comes out to warm itself in the sun, it will try to pass under the wire. As it does, it will feel the wire catching its scales and panic, getting tangled in the wire. Animals can get careless too, just like humans."

"Thanks for that. I'll go and make the trap."

Bill started for home, calling back, "See you all later and thanks for a great day."

The strange trap worked and a few days later, they found the snake completely wrapped up in the wire. One of their neighbours, who had more experience handling Australian wildlife, removed the snake. He put it in a bag and took it far off in the bush, where he released the reptile into its natural surroundings.

"Well! I sure am relieved to know that snake is no longer living under our house," Bill's mum said.

"Me, too," agreed Bill. "Even snakes can't be too careful!"



CAUGHT BY THE TIDE

Hi Bill! What are you up to?" asked Rex one sunny morning. "Nothing much," Bill shrugged. "On a beautiful day like this, I reckon we should be on the beach."

"Yes, but it would be fun to go somewhere less crowded."

It was summer holidays and Forster was packed with visitors who had travelled up from Newcastle and Maitland to breathe some fresh air and swim off some of the coal dust. The beach was overcrowded, the hire boats were all booked and every fishing spot was occupied.

The cafes, milk bars and bakeries were also full of hungry people. It was so busy that Bill and his mates had to meet on Gregory's wharf to eat their ice-cream.

"Why don't we ride out to Burgess Beach and walk around to that great little hideaway beach at the bottom of the cliff? We'll have the beach all to ourselves—the tourists don't know it exists."

With a whoop and a yahoo at the brilliance of their plan, they jumped on their bikes and pedalled to Burgess Beach. At



the southern end of the beach, a headland jutted out into the surf. When the tide was out, it was possible to run around the rocks before the next wave came crashing against the steep, rocky outcrop. Once around the rocks, there was a small and beautiful horseshoe-shaped beach—a perfect hideaway.

“We’re like Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday walking on this beach,” Rex said as he stepped into Bill’s footsteps in the sand. “There isn’t another footprint anywhere.”

“It sure is peaceful,” agreed Bill. “Maybe not the safest place to swim but it should be OK if we don’t go out too far.”

“We should have brought our fishing rods,” said Rex, looking about thoughtfully. “But at least we have a ball to kick around.”

“And we can run around as much as we like without stepping on anyone,” laughed Bill.

As they stretched out on their towels and began to take in the scenery, they noticed a lone fisherman, quietly sitting on the rocks at the far end of the beach.

“Isn’t that Colin?” asked Bill.

“It sure looks like him. Why don’t we go and see if he’s had any luck? They raced each other along the short beach and clambered over the rocks to where Colin was fishing with a bamboo pole.

“Hi, Colin,” they called. “Any luck?”

“G’day, fellas!” he replied. “So far so good, have a look in the bucket.”

“Wow!” Bill exclaimed. “You must be using special bait.”

“Yeah! Not bad, eh!” he joked.

“Not bad at all. I’ll bet some of the tourists would love to see your catch,” said Rex.

“Aw! They’re doing a good job feeding the fish during the summer, so we can catch them in the winter when they’re nice





and fat.” Colin was a local Aborigine, always laughing and making others laugh with his dry sense of humour. He was liked by everyone and was respected as a first-rate fisherman.

“You can help yourself to a couple of fish if you want. They’re biting well today,” offered Colin.

“Thanks Colin but we haven’t got anything to carry them in. Besides, you have a family to feed so you need every fish you can catch.”

“Just tell us what kind of bait you’re using,” Rex asked eagerly.

“OK but don’t spread it around,” cautioned Colin. “I’m using chicken liver. It’s a few days old so don’t get too close. It’s a bit on the nose but the fish love it.”

“Good on you, Colin,” they laughed, as they scrambled back over the rocks to their secret beach.

“By the way,” Colin called, “watch out that you don’t get caught by the tide. You have to go out the way you came in. If the tide comes in, you’ll have to sit on the rocks for a few hours until the tide goes out again. That won’t be til late tonight.”

The boys waved to show their gratitude for his advice and headed in for a swim. There were good waves for body surfing so the boys were still enjoying themselves when Colin walked by on his way home.

“Phew! I’m exhausted,” puffed Rex. “I’m going in for a rest. We’ve been surfing for over an hour.”

“Me, too,” agreed Bill. “I’m exhausted. Lying in the sun sounds good to me.”

After toasting in the hot sun for awhile, the boys felt sunburn coming on. They decided to put their T-shirts on and play with the ball they’d brought. It was when Bill missed the ball and had to run close to the rocks to get it that he noticed how far up the beach the waves were reaching. He

looked to see if the way was clear for them to get past the rocks at the base of the cliff and felt his heart lurch.

"Hey Rex!" he called. "We're stuck! The tide's in and it's too deep for us to get around the rocks."

The waves were too big now and there was a strong current swirling around the cliff.

"How could we be so stupid!" cried Rex. "We forgot to watch the tide and now we're trapped."

"We should've listened to Colin," moaned Bill.

"What happens now? I'll get into all kinds of trouble if I'm late home."

"The real problem is that they'll all wonder why we didn't come home. They don't know where we are."

The boys decided to explore both ends of the beach to see if there was any way out. Not a chance. Then they searched above for a way to climb the cliff.

"Well!" exclaimed Rex. "I'm willing to have a go at the cliff. Desperate times call for desperate actions—and this is pretty desperate."

"OK!" agreed Bill. "I'm with you. Let's go for it."

They hung their towels over their shoulders and started to scramble up the rugged cliff face. About halfway up, it seemed they could go no further. The cliff leaned outward, and the surface was loose and crumbly, with no ledges to grip with their hands or feet.

"We're stuck," Rex cried. "What a way to go. We can't go up and I don't fancy trying to get down now we've come this far."

"Let's try going sideways," suggested Bill. "I have a bit of a ledge here. Follow me, but don't look down and go slowly."

The boys inched their way along the cliff face, one careful step at a time. Finally, they came to a gap in the cliff where they could get a foothold and grab some roots of the trees above.



"This is better," said Bill. "Let me get ahead a little, then follow me up until we reach the top."

"OK, but don't slip or we'll both go down," muttered Rex as he clung to the cliff edge, his face pale and strained.

It was a slow process as they scrambled up, gripping whatever they could safely rely on. Soon, they found more roots and small shrubs they could trust as handholds or places to rest their feet.

"We should be there soon with all this greenery and strong roots," encouraged Bill. "It looks as though there's some *lantana** at the top to greet us."

The thick hedge of prickly *lantana* was so dense they couldn't find a way through it. *Lantana* is a noxious weed that ruins huge areas of farmland. It has a nasty smell and is very prickly. It is also a great hiding place for rabbits and other pests.

"What now?" cried Rex. "We jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. I can't even get my hand into this tangled mess, let alone my body."

"There's only one way to go," said Bill. "We have to climb on top of it and crawl along on our hands and knees."

"You go first, you're lighter," suggested Rex. "If you think it's safe, I'll follow."

Ever so slowly, the boys inched their way along the top of the swaying tangled mass of *lantana*. They couldn't see the ground below, just a dingy gloom beneath them.

"This *lantana* doesn't feel very secure," stammered Rex. "I would hate to fall through this mass of sticks and branches."

"This area is thick because it's windswept but it will thin out as we get to the highest point. From then on it, will level out and we should be able to find a way down," said Bill hopefully. "It's swaying a lot now. I'm starting to walk on the

tops of the branches but I still can't see the ground."

Just then, there was a sudden woody "crunch" and Bill disappeared. Only his towel remained but as Rex approached, he could see Bill struggling to untangle himself as he tried to reach the ground.

"Are you OK?" Rex called anxiously.

"Not really," moaned Bill. "My shirt's ripped and I'm all scratched. This stuff's bad news."

"Can you see the ground from where you are?" Rex called.

"Yeah, it's about three feet [1 metre] down. I'll be able to stand up once I've untangled myself. It's so hard to break through because it's so—ow—prickly."

After more rips and scratches and much muttering, Bill finally reached the ground. Then he had to crawl along on his stomach. There were a few tracks made by small animals he could follow but it was still slow progress.

"Hey! What about me?" Rex called. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Try climbing down where I fell through and follow me out," Bill called back.

Poor Rex couldn't stay where he was but he didn't fancy dropping into the prickly mess below.

"So much for a quiet day at the beach," he muttered. "Now I have to get scratched to bits."

Eventually, the boys broke through onto open ground. They lay on the grass, gasping as surprised cows stopped munching in mid chew to stare at the two bleeding boys who had just crawled out of nowhere.

That night, two very sorry boys had to get first aid and a gentle scolding about being more watchful. It was an adventure and a lesson they would never forget.



THE TREASURE SHED

Where are you going in the rain?" Bill's mum wanted to know. "It's a miserable day. Why not stay in and read a book or something?"

"It's OK, Mum," Bill replied. "Ron and I want to explore his dad's old shed. It's hardly been touched for 20 years! Ron's grandfather built it and it's a treasure house, full of amazing stuff. It's the perfect place to be on a rainy day."

"More like a shed full of old junk, if you ask me," his mum said. "There are probably lots of rats and even snakes living among all those forgotten bits and pieces."

"Don't worry about us, we'll have plenty of dogs helping us explore," Bill assured her.

Bill rode off to his neighbour's farm, pulling his horse up at the old shed. It was a long, open kind of shed with a sloping iron roof and iron sides. It was deep enough to park a small bus inside, out of the weather. Lots of machinery, old carts, harnesses and even an old truck had been stored in the shed over the years and left for a rainy day exactly like this one.

"Hi, Ron," Bill called out as he rode around the shed. "Is it OK if I tie up my horse in the shelter of the workshop?"

"Sure," Ron called. "We can put the rail up so he can wander about and munch on some hay."

"I only just made it. That rain is heavy now and sure is loud on this tin roof."

"Where shall we start?" Ron asked. "There's so much stuff. We could be here for days and not see everything. Even Dad hasn't gone over everything in here."

"Let's check out the old Ford truck. That cabin's jammed with stuff," Bill suggested, weaving his way toward it.

"We'll have to climb over this old cart. Look out for all the rusty farm machinery—some of these edges are sharp," Ron warned. "And watch out for those old, rotting wheat bags," he added as Bill led the way. "There could be all kinds of beasties living in there."

The more they explored, the spookier and more mysterious the old shed became. It seemed every old sack or piece of furniture concealed unknown possibilities. Unidentifiable objects hung from the rafters and various ancient treasures hung from nails. Dusty old trunks cluttered the floor, creating dark homes for spiders. Everywhere they looked, wired-up tea chests and other bits and pieces from years gone by competed for their attention.

After the boys tired of pretending to drive the old Ford truck, they decided to investigate the pile of bags on the tray behind the cabin. They were the mustiest, oldest corn bags Bill had ever seen. The smell of rot filled the air around them.

As the boys moved the top three or four, there was a riot of movement. They had found a nest of rats! The boys scrambled up onto the truck cabin as rats spilled all over the place. The dogs had shown little interest in what was going



on but suddenly, they came to life. Dogs and rats scattered in all directions as the boys sat on the cabin roof, cheering on the dogs as they frantically chased the rats in and out of the equipment.

When the rat family disappeared, Bill and Ron investigated the nest. They were amazed to find nine tiny, pink, hairless baby rats, warm and snug in a nest of torn paper, straw and hen feathers.

“A lot of work went into making that nest,” Bill murmured.

“Just like those mud nests the swallows build up in the rafters and above the doors. They spend months carrying mud in their tiny beaks to build a cosy nest for their babies.”

Their next investigation was an old flatbed cart, used for carrying bales of hay. Two horses were needed to pull the heavy wooden cart. The harness equipment was piled on top.

“This place is a museum with all this stuff from the past,” Bill said.

“Grandpa actually used all this gear. He used that old contraption for ploughing with his horses. Imagine having to use these old things now.”

“Then it isn’t fair to call this old equipment junk, is it?” suggested Bill.

“No way! This is history,” emphasised Ron with a grin. “So let’s explore some more.”

There were rusty ploughs, stump pullers, crosscut saws, sledgehammers with sets of wedges, horseshoeing equipment, rolls of wire, a sled and even an old sulky. It was a two-seater sulky with a tray at the back for carrying parcels or cases. The boys could imagine a flash pony trotting along between the shafts of the brightly-painted sulky, with Ron’s grandparents all dressed up on their way to church or visiting neighbours.

As the boys moved in and out, under and around the





objects, they came to a set of large drums that were used for fuel. On top they found another pile of bags.

“Shall we check out the bags or leave them be?” questioned Bill. “They could be interesting but after the last lot . . .”

“Not sure,” Ron warned. “A very big carpet snake lives in this shed—did I mention that? And I’ve seen a red-bellied black snake coming and going, so we might be in for a surprise.”

Of course, the boys couldn’t resist. But before disturbing the bags, the boys made sure they had a clear exit. They collected a couple of long-handled hay rakes and as soon as they were ready, Bill stood back a bit while Ron poked at the bags. As he was removing the third bag, the one below it began to move on its own. Then from beneath the folds of the bag crept a sleepy possum.

“Wow!” exclaimed Bill. “I didn’t expect that. The poor guy looks just as surprised to see us and he’s wondering why it’s so light. Look at his big eyes! He’s not sure what’s going on and he or she probably has a nest in there with a couple of babies.”

“Maybe we should leave him in peace and explore somewhere else,” suggested Ron.

As the boys were crawling over some old machinery, they heard a strange sound. It seemed to come from above them so they gazed upward. Bill shivered as they watched a huge carpet snake slithering along the rafters.

“He must be twice as long as me,” Bill guessed. “Look, he has a couple of bumps! He’s already had dinner. He’s probably doing his bit to keep the rat population under control.”

“We think he is more than 12 feet long [4 metres] but no-one is prepared to do the measuring,” laughed Ron. “This is his home and we are happy for him to do what carpet

snakes do here, as long as he keeps out of the hen house.”

It was getting late as the boys worked their way to the far end of the shed, where there was a pile of wooden boxes of various shapes and sizes.

“What’s in these?” Bill asked.

“Nuts, bolts, bits of machinery, rusty nails and an unbelievable collection of bits and pieces that have accumulated over the years that are too heavy to shift. It’s part of our glorious historical collection!” Ron laughed proudly.

As the boys were leaving, Bill couldn’t resist the temptation to kick a cardboard box that lay near the entrance. Suddenly, the box came alive and out slithered a huge red-bellied black snake, ready to do battle. The boys bolted for the railing fence and flung themselves up. Clinging to the top rail, they watched as the snake stared at them for a moment before heading for the nearby dam.

“Whoever said history was just old dead stuff? So many creatures living there! That was fun—almost too much fun!” declared Bill. “I’m more than ready for a clean house and a warm bed. But it does show how important our history is. We must never forget the things that make up our past.”

“You’re right, Bill,” agreed Ron. “This has been a real history lesson and a fun way to spend a wet Sunday. By the way, don’t forget to look under your bed before you hop in,” he laughed as Bill mounted up and rode away.



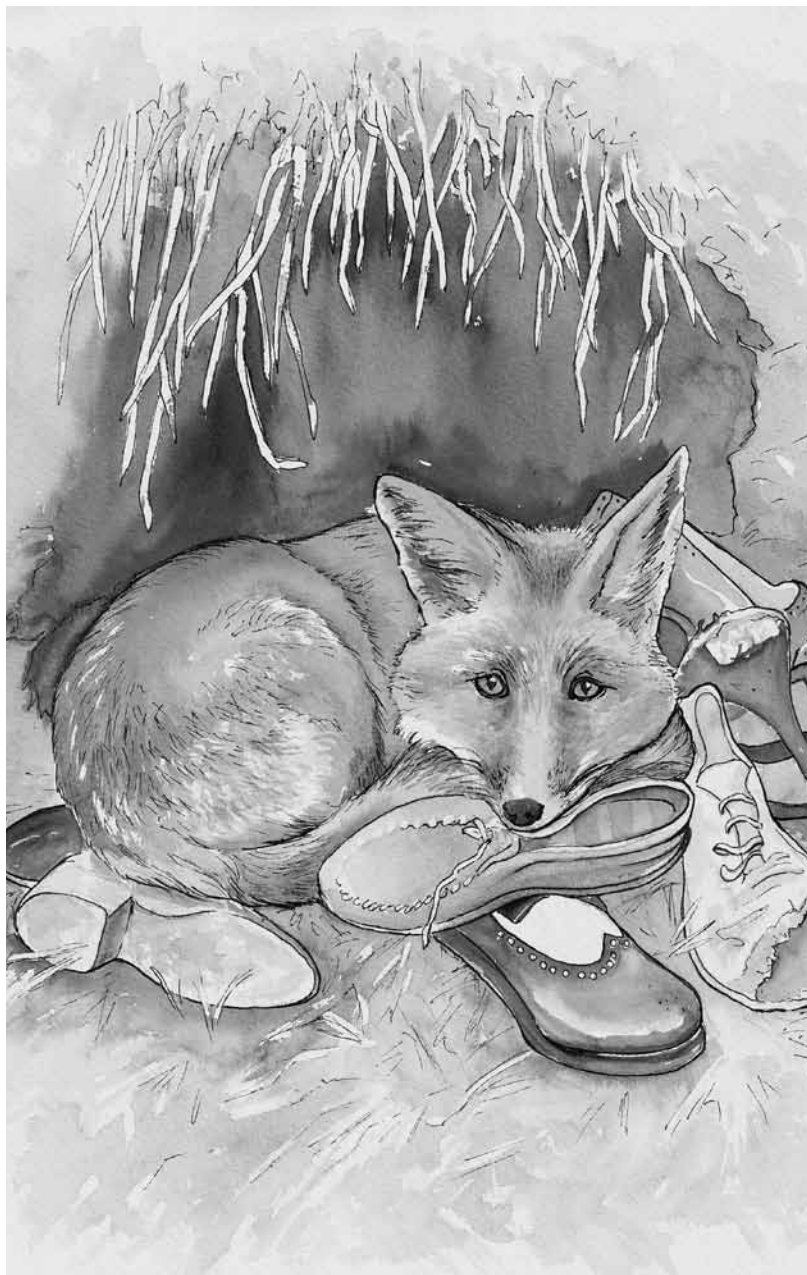
127 STOLEN SHOES

Past the bridge that spans the entrance to Wallis Lake was a large caravan park. On one visit, Bill was intrigued by a sign at the receptionist's counter. It read, "Do not leave your shoes out at night. Foxes may steal them."

"Most people have a good laugh when they read the warning," the receptionist said with a smile. Then she told Bill the story behind the sign.

It had been going on for years. People kept coming to the office to complain about missing shoes. Sometimes they had lost both shoes but most often, it was just one that had disappeared. Those who had lost both shoes accused their fellow campers of stealing. Those who lost only one were completely mystified. The manager and his staff soon became embarrassed by the huge number of complaints from the upset campers and decided to set a trap.

The locals suggested a dog must have developed a nose for shoes and one joker had a bet that it was a female. The mystery became a conversational topic whenever people met





for special occasions. The local policeman asked people to tie up their dogs for a week while the caravan park people dropped a few old shoes about. The plan was agreed and a date was set. Odd shoes were placed around the park and unsurprisingly, most of them disappeared on the first night.

The local ranger was not aware of any stray dogs in the area, so he made a special trap like a chicken coop. He baited it with a shiny leather shoe and sat back to wait. The next morning, a curious crowd was amazed to discover a handsome fox with a big, bushy tail patrolling the cage. He guiltily ignored a well-chewed leather shoe.

No-one realised a family of foxes lived in a den in the hill behind the caravan park. As is the habit of foxes, they kept well out of sight and only wandered at night. He was a healthy looking animal, so it was decided to let him loose and warn people not to leave their shoes outside at night.

With a few exceptions, the plan worked quite well. Then an angry camper complained that his new Italian-made patent-leather shoes had disappeared during the night. He wanted the police informed so the thief could be caught and charged.

When the receptionist pointed to the warning notice, he was not consoled and demanded that a posse be formed to hunt down the offender. He also wanted compensation for the loss of his special shoes. When the manager was called, he pointed out the warning notice. He was not obliged to pay for the cost of the camper's shoes.

The irate camper was not satisfied. He demanded payment or the return of his precious shoes. When the manager commented that if his shoes were so valuable he shouldn't have left them outside in the first place, the conversation grew more heated. It was nearing boiling point when another distraught camper came to the office to complain about a

missing shoe. Now both campers were talking tough and threatening serious action.

"So where's the fox's den?" demanded the first camper. "We should get a group of campers together and go dig them out."

"I agree," growled the second camper. "Let's get our spades and dig up their hide-out."

"Alright" agreed the manager. "I will show you where their den is but you must promise not to harm the foxes."

"OK! That's fair enough," said the shoeless campers. "Let's round up some helpers and do some digging."

So it was that half a dozen men, accompanied by some curious wives, marched up the hill to where the unsuspecting foxes were happily chewing on their find from the night before.

"There are a few old dens in this area," explained the manager. "They may all have shoes in them. It might be why they keep digging out new dens. The old dens may be getting too crowded."

The anger subsided as the campers started to see the funny side of their adventure. Then the hilarity increased as the men uncovered piles of shoes. The further they dug, the more shoes were found. As the laughter and activity increased, more and more people wandered up the hill to satisfy their curiosity. Even the manager was amazed at the number of shoes uncovered. They were mostly odd shoes, of all sizes and colours.

In the midst of all the activity, there was a shout of delight. "Hooray!" shouted the camper who had lost his Italian shoes. "Here they are—and in reasonable condition! They just have a few teeth marks to remind me of the experience."

The other camper found his missing shoe as well, so it was decided to leave the newer dens intact. No-one wanted to



disturb the frightened foxes! A camper suggested that they count the shoes scattered about and to everyone's amazement, the shoes tallied 127.

There was much laughter and conversation as the campers returned to their caravans. Many people repeated one particular comment: the wisdom of following warning notices that are put in place for people's protection—no matter how bizarre they may seem.

"Make sure you put your shoes inside tonight," said the wife of the men who lost one of his shoes.

"Don't worry," replied her husband. "I've done enough digging for today."

The family of foxes continued to live in their hillside dens and it was rare to see them. It has been noted that every year, the odd shoe still goes missing. Bill was one of the campers who made sure his shoes were carefully tucked out of the way.



BILL MEETS MR P VERENCE

After a lengthy and vigorous family discussion, it was finally agreed that Bill could go to college for one year.

"Alright," said Bill's dad as he threw his arms in the air. "I give in but it's only for one year. If Bill doesn't do any good or he hates the place, he comes home and learns to be a carpenter."

"But what if he does well?" Bill's mum asked. "Will you help him with his college fees if he chooses to go on and do a course of study?"

"No! He'll be on his own," stated Bill's dad. "I want him to follow in the footsteps of the family trade. Carpentry is a good way to earn a living and I'm willing to teach him all I know. But if he chooses to study for some professional qualification, he can pay his own way. And what's more, he can do some extra work to help pay for his first year's fees."

So at 16, Bill was about to face some of his biggest



challenges. Bill felt he had to make the break because he didn't enjoy the building trade. He hated walking around on rafters, digging foundations, mixing cement, nailing and punching nails into rooms of floorboards, and carrying heavy loads up and down ladders. He felt more at home in a saddle, rounding up cattle or working in a stockyard. His real aim was to be a jackaroo but he felt some knowledge of accounting would be useful.

The big thing was to get away to where he could make his own decisions and college was his best chance of freedom. He felt like a frustrated hen, running up and down the fenceline, looking for a hole to escape through.

The next day, he met his mates at their favourite milk bar. As they ate their ice-cream, he broke the news.

"Wow!" Rex sat back, staring. "Fancy you going off to some flash college. How can you leave all your mates? You won't know anybody at college! You'll have to make a whole new lot of friends."

"Yeah," said Ron, "and paying your own way, too! You'll have to sell your horse, your saddle, your stockwhip—even your bicycle. It's going to be a bit hard, mate."

"I know but I have to do it. I can't let anything stand in the way of my plans," explained Bill. "I'll miss you all and this town but there's a big world out there and it beckons."

"I sure admire your courage," mused Tom. "I could never up and leave home. This is where my family belongs and all my friends are here. This place is my place and I plan to spend my life here."

"Good on you, Tom," said Bill. "You know what you want, too. It will be tough to leave but I don't see myself staying here forever. If I stay now, it'll be even a lot harder to leave later on. It may be now or never."





Bill's mates didn't argue. They knew how much he wanted to be a jackaroo and they knew he would make a great one.

On his way home, Bill rode his horse into the yard of an old friend called "Old Man Fraser." The old man had been thrown off a bucking horse one time too many and was no longer able to ride but he had been a drover, a horse trainer and a rodeo champion.

Bill had received a lot of advice from the old man over the years and really valued his friendship. When he recovered from the surprise that Bill was off to college, Old Man Fraser offered some more advice.

"There's one person you'll need to get to know in life," he commented. "His name is Mr Percy Verence and he will help you get through many difficult situations."

"How will I get to know him? I've never heard of him."

"Ah!" exclaimed the old man. "You'll get to know him whenever you feel like throwing in the towel. There'll be times when you'll find the road getting a bit steep. That's when you'll need the help of Mr Percy Verence."

When Bill got home, he asked his mum if she had ever heard of a man by the name of Percy Verence. He was quite surprised when she roared with laughter.

"Where did you hear that name?" she smiled. "Who have you been talking to?"

When Bill told her the story, his mum explained how important "perseverance" was for people who want to make their way in life. Success in life doesn't come easy, so we have to keep trying until we succeed.

Bill started looking around for some work he could do to help with his expenses. As it was getting near to Christmas, his neighbour, Harry, agreed to take him on. He delivered milk to the campgrounds and caravan parks, which were

fast filling up with holidaymakers. Bill would have to be up before 5 am to catch Harry, who set off early on his milk cart pulled by his famous horse.

Everyone knew Harry's milk cart horse was smart. As Harry went from house to house filling the waiting jugs from his special dipper, the horse would keep pace with him. As Harry walked out of each house, the horse and cart would be waiting for him. But if Harry stopped to chat, the horse would move off as if to say, "You've had long enough."

Bill enjoyed helping Harry with his milk delivery each morning. He would be home by 7 o'clock, which was just enough time to clean up, have his breakfast and be at work by 8. The men who worked for his dad understood why Bill turned up to the building site an hour late.

A friendly Greek family who ran a milk bar and restaurant at the wharf end of town agreed to give Bill a job in the evenings. It was new for him to be standing behind a counter. He had to make milkshakes, serve ice-cream sundaes, attend to customers who struggled with decisions over the various confectionary and serve at tables when the waitresses were run off their feet.

Bill had to learn fast. He made some mistakes and even got abused by a customer he accidentally short-changed. He worked from the milk cart at 5 am through to milkshakes until 10 pm, with building in between. He was glad his crazy routine was only for two months.

It was a sad day when Bill had to sell his horse but the loss was made a lot easier by putting Pal in the hands of a good friend, who Bill knew would take good care of him. None of his other sales were as difficult and soon, Bill found himself left with only a suitcase full of clothes and a few small possessions.

After saying farewell to his dad, his mum accompanied him



by bus to the Taree train station. As they talked about what he had managed to do over the summer, Bill was reminded of Old Man Fraser, the horseman who had introduced him to Percy Verence. He wasn't even at college yet and he had already made a new friend. Bill had a feeling he was going to get to know him very well.

Words

- Aborigine** an indigenous Australian, descended from the people groups who inhabited the land before European explorers and colonists arrived
- barquentine** a small sailing ship with two masts of square sails running breadthways, the third mast with triangular sails that runs lengthways.
- blue heeler** an Australian cattle dog, a good working dog but sometimes vicious with people they do not know
- bush** a natural area of land covered with trees, a forest
- carpet snake** a large, non-venomous Australian python
- fellas** a colloquial way of saying “fellows,” used as a way of addressing a group of people, particularly, men or boys, like “guys” or “gentlemen”
- flying fox** large bats with fox-like heads that feed on fruit and blossoms
- lantana** a fast-growing, flowering spiky bush that grows as a weed in many parts of Australia
- mates** close friends



- Ned Kelly** a notorious Australian bushranger—outlaw or highwayman—infamous in the 1870s and arrested in 1880, but still a strong image in Australian culture
- scrub** a natural area of land covered with low trees or shrubs
- show** a fair or exhibition
- stickybeak** to be excessively curious or someone who is excessively curious
- Weet-Bix** a whole wheat breakfast cereal, common in Australia and New Zealand

